RABBIT
HOLE
CODY LEE

Will let out an irritated groan as the sound of the alarm hit his ears. He blinked, once, twice, three times, before closing his eyes again. He turned around in bed, facing the clock, and buried his head into his sheets. The irritable beeping was tearing into his skull, but he could not bring himself to get out of bed. He moaned, dearly wanting to reach out a hand and bring it back down onto the sleep button. He felt groggy and exhausted. It almost felt as if he had not gone to sleep at all. How was the alarm going off already? Surely it couldn't be morning yet?

He cracked his eye open, trying to muster up the energy to roll out of bed. He gripped the sheets in his hands as he tried to push himself up. He felt his will Five more minutes couldn't hurt… Five more minutes couldn't hurt. He had plenty of time. The alarm had just gone off, after all. If he gave himself another ten minutes, he would be better off in the long run…

The alarm suddenly stopped beeping. Will froze. He pressed himself up in bed and stared at the alarm in horror.

It read 8:00. He had it set for 7:30. he had overslept! Class was going to start in half an hour!

He found himself leaping out of bed and rushing to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. Will was scowling as he washed himself, applied cologne, brushed his teeth, dressed, and stomped out of the door without even sliding his shoes on properly. He quickly stopped to adjust them on their porch, bending over to grab hold of them and tugged, making sure they fit snugly. And then he was off. Racing down the side walk at a sprint. Passerby hurriedly leapt out of his way and yelled after him as he raced past the bus stop, the one that he normally took to the first building, and continued sprinting along the sidewalk. He ignored the laughs and jeers from other students as he made his way to the building where he would be taking his first class of the day.

He was sweating a little when he arrived, but he was not breathing hard. He shouldered his backpack and stared up at the building. A

few students were sitting chatting near the front door as he made his way up.

He entered the building, and made his way into a bright beautiful entrance hall. Stained glass stared at him from above as he made his way past the front desk where an older woman sat typing at her computer. He stepped up the stairs, and took a right to find the elevator. He pressed the up key, and waited impatiently as the elevator came down to a stop.

A couple of older men were standing there, in suits, chatting to one another.

"Are you attending the protest?"

"I wish, but I have a paper to finish. Perhaps I'll donate-"

Will allowed them to step out past them before hurriedly stepping inside. He pressed the button for the fourth floor and the elevator doors slid shut behind him. He stood in stony silence as the elevator began to rise.

To his annoyance the elevator stopped on the second floor. A rather pretty Chinese girl with long black hair stepped through. She gave Will a glance and then smiled. Will turned his head down to his bag and double checked to make sure that the zipper was completely closed.

He hurriedly stepped out onto the fourth floor and quietly made his way into class. He could see them through the window in the door. The professor was already in mid lecture. Will slowly turned the knob and tiptoed inside.

The professor gave him a dirty look as he stepped up to his desk and set his back on top of it. The girl sitting next to him looked his way as he sat down and procured a pen and notebook from his bag.

"What were we talking about?" He asked her quietly, as he flipped open the notebook and ran his eyes across part way filled page.

"About the importance of being punctual!" She hissed.

"Sorry Hermione." Will said snippily. "I was just asking a question!"

“My name isn’t Hermione-“ The girl retorted, clearly not getting the joke.

He turned away from her to see the Professor giving him an even nastier look. Will, who disliked the Professor as much as she disliked him, stared back but did not speak.

It was a very uncomfortable half an hour. Will was forced sit through an uncomfortable speech on the evils of politics and the nature of man. He had no idea what to make of what he had just been told as the bell rang.

“Hey, Hermione.” He said, turning to the girl on his right. “Could I look at your notes?”

She huffed at him and walked away, nose in the air. He groaned, not at all surprised at her response, and looked down at his own notes. He supposed he would have to do his own independent reading on his own time. The thought depressed him.

He stood up, gathered his things, and stepped back out into the hall. Plenty of his classmates were surrounding him now. Look on the bright side. He reminded himself sharply. had been only be late for one class.

He got into an elevator with some students who were all rapidly discussing human rights from around the world. Will suspected that this had something to do with the lecture he had just sat through, but felt he had nothing to contribute to the conversation. B, and said nothing. By the time the door opened, and the group filtered out into the entrance hall, he felt very stupid and very much out of touch with current day issues.

He had not had breakfast. He had been too much of a hurry to even consider eating. He took the time to have a meal at a restaurant before moving on. He had a very nice meal of bacon, eggs, and pancakes before stepping back into the street, feeling somewhat rejuvenated.

He spent the hour before his next class studying on a park bench, in a vain attempt to understand the lecture he had just been given. He

reviewed his notes and tried finding relevant articles on the subject on his phone. He made little progress before it was time for his next class, but he felt a little more confident as he got to his feet and made his way to his next class. This was much more enjoyable than the first. They learned equations and formulas and practical uses for them. Will found it much more to his liking.

When that class had ended he returned to the park to continue reading up on the first lecture. He made himself comfortable as he read, occasionally watching local girls playing with their dogs or doing gymnastics on the grass. Once a couple of hours had passed he gathered up his things and headed off to the Dojo.

(Last Name) Dojo was quickly becoming one of the most well-known martial arts schools in the region. It had been founded by his friend Jason, who had gotten himself into hundreds of street fights growing up. it was becoming very well known for teaching martial arts that were practical in urban environments. Will had been studying here since the first school opened. One of the major reasons he chose this specific University was that Jason's wife Reiko had gotten her Doctorate here.

He headed home first to leave behind his school things and grab his other bag, and then made his way back to the Dojo, which was a little out of the way for most students.

He stepped up the steps to the building and opened the glass doors. The first thing he saw was Reiko, some distance away, polishing a shelf.

"Are you going to get a degree in cleaning next?" Will asked her. Reiko had more degrees in more fields than he even knew existed.

She looked down at him and smiled. "Hello Will." She said warmly. "I would do it, if I wasn't already a master." She whipped the cloth in front of her like a nunchaku. It brushed against the shelf, wiping away a little of the dust.

Reiko was a very tiny woman. Her Mother was Japanese, and she seemed to take after her in build. She looked tiny and delicate,

rather like a doll. Will had honestly though her one of the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen. One of the great disappointments in his life was learning that she didn't have a younger sister.

"Jason's busy today." Reiko said. "So I'll be leading the class today. Is that alright?"

Reiko had been trained by Jason personally and knew what she was doing, but Will greatly preferred working with Jason. He felt closer to him than anyone else he had ever met in his life. He had given him direction and purpose, even if he didn't quite know where he was going or what his purpose was, exactly.

"That's alright." He said. "But aren't you way busier than he is?" He never understood how Reiko had so many degrees and yet had still found the time to help out at her husband's dojo.

"Nonsense." Reiko said promptly, as she lowered the rag to her side. "Why don't you get dressed?" Will nodded, and gave her a smile as he stepped past her into the changing room down the hall and to the left.

He set his bag on the bench and changed into his martial arts things. He left his shoes, bag, and clothes behind in his locker as he stepped out to meet the others. Reiko was busy chatting with an older man who had just recently joined the Dojo. He seemed somewhat perturbed that Jason was not available today, and Reiko was apologizing profusely about it. Will decided to keep his distance for now and stood leaning against a nearby wall, watching the others with interest. Being one of the more experienced students, he took it upon himself to see how everyone was coming along. Plenty of people came in for only one or two sessions before dropping off and losing interest, but there were also many that chose to stay. He was surprised to see that a lot of them were women. Apparently the husband and wife team of Jason and Reiko were very appealing to older, married women who were looking for a new hobby.

There weren't a whole lot of college students, unfortunately. Sometimes local thugs would come in demanding to learn how to

beat people up, but Jason was usually quick to set them straight. Either they would be scared off or become disciplined, responsible young men within a matter of weeks. Will found it incredible how Jason was able to win the respect of these kinds of people so quickly and so easily. Perhaps he shouldn't have been so surprised. Jason had come from that kind of background, after all. He knew what these people were like, what they had been through, what they responded to, what they wanted in their lives. He was able to relate to them in a way that their teachers, parents, and neighbors would never be able to.

"Alright everyone!" Reiko chirped, clapping her hands together. "Follow me and look lively!" She didn't have the stern professionalism that Jason tended to exude. She seemed more like a preschool teacher leading her class out to the playground. They followed her obediently out into the floor and took their places, facing her. She stood there smiling, her back to the mirror, her hands folded behind her back. Will glanced at the mirror, not for the first time noticing that she was the one of the shortest people here, if not the shortest.

"Will, if you could come up here and help me demonstrate please…"

They worked through a number of routines and situations and conditioning. Will was a little surprised at how inactive Reiko seemed today. Although she shouted out instructions as she usually did, she often asked him to demonstrate moves. He figured that she was trying to be more involved with individuals that needed help, as he often noticed her stopping individuals and correcting their form. She, much like Jason, knew everyone by name and was quick to point out very specific aspects of their form or strikes.

It was a very enjoyable session, and lots of the students surrounded the two of them afterwards, wanting to chat. It was a while before the hall emptied, and he and Reiko were left alone.

He ended up staying a little bit later than usual practicing his moves in front of the mirror as Reiko chatted to him absentmindedly.

“Jason wants to open more locations.” She told him. “It’s always been the goal.”

“Won’t that be expensive?”

“Oh, of course!” Reiko told him. “But we’ve been planning this since we opened.” She looked his way, pressing her finger up against her cheek. “Actually, the thing we’re most concerned about is finding good instructors.” She said. “Someone to run this location, while we start up the new one.”

“Oh yeah?” Will said. “Any luck so far?”

“Oh, we have a couple of prospects in mind.” Reiko said airily. “We’ve been training a lot of great students.”

“You have!” Will told her. “Everyone’s gotten so much better!” Reiko met his eye and smiled. “Who do you have in mind?” He was already trying to puzzle it out. There was an older guy named Damon who had a background in Muay Thai and Jeet Kune Do. He had smacked around Will like a rag doll the first time they had sparred.

Reiko smiled at him even wider and then turned away from him. “How is school going?” She asked conversationally. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Not as much as I would like.” He said. “I’m not sure what I want to do yet.”

“You should have figured it out before you went.” She told him, matter of factly. He groaned. He knew a lecture a coming.

“Thanks Mom.”

“It’s true!” She said earnestly, as she stepped closer to him. “Listen. What are you good at? What do you spend all of your free time doing?”

“Sleeping.” He answered immediately. “Maybe I could sell my body to researchers studying sleep.”

“You wouldn’t sell your body.” She told him, annoyed. “They would have you come in for study sessions and then pay you for your time. But it wouldn’t be enough for a career-“

“I was joking Reiko.” He said, exasperatedly. “Do you have a Doctorate in Sleep too?”

“I’m working on it-“

She stopped. They could hear the glass door opening, and then shut.

Reiko gave a start. “Did I lock the door?” She asked him anxiously, as she hurriedly began to walk to the door to the main hall.

“How should I know?”

They stepped out of the room and turned to the entrance hall, and to Will’s immense pleasure they saw Jason sliding out of a jacket and hat and tossing them onto a nearby shelf.

“We have a coat rack for that!” Reiko said sharply, as she darted forward and grabbed hold of them. “Look, see, it’s over here…”

She grabbed Jason’s arm and steered him back towards the door and gestured wildly towards the empty coat rack that was standing by the door. Jason blinked at it.

“That’s what that’s for?”

Reiko gave him a look, and they both burst out laughing. Will found himself smiling as he watched them.

“Oh, hey Will.” Jason said. He had seen him as he turned around. “Staying late again?”

“Yeah, I wanted to keep practicing.” Will told him earnestly, as he placed his hands on top of his head. “I feel like I haven’t improved at all.”

“Don’t say that.” Jason said sharply. “You’re incredible! The best I’ve ever had.”

“Don’t give him too much of an ego, Jason.” Reiko told him, but Jason shook his head.

“No, I mean it.” He said. “Will, you came to me with absolutely no spectacular physical ability for fighting at all, and now look at you.”

Will frowned. That had been a very long time ago. It had been a very long time he had first started studying under Jason.

He had been twelve years old.. His parents, second generation Chinese immigrants, had been very strict with him. He had not been allowed outside as much as he would like, as his parents were very eager to start him on the highest possible education program in the area. He spent entire days inside, pouring over books and studying. He did well, but not well enough. He was not the golden child in the class. Kimiko Ninagawa was. And what was worse, she was Japanese.

His parents, his Father mainly, berated him over and over again. Will was disgracing the Wei family name; he was not pushing himself hard enough. He had no business coming behind a girl, a Japanese girl at that! As the situation grew worse and worse, as his Father grew angrier and angrier, he became very cold and depressed. He had no idea what to do. It was bad enough that he wasn't doing as well as he should in school. He was beginning to worry what his parents would say if he ever admitted that he thought that Kimiko was incredibly cute.

He had been taking a walk alone in the dark, without his parent's knowledge, thinking deeply about the situation. He disliked this feeling of not being able to talk to the girl he liked, and he hated this feeling of helplessness that his parents brought down on him. There had to be a way out. There just had to.

"Hey Chink!"

He stopped, freezing in the street like a deer in the headlights. His eyes flitted to the side, as if expecting an attack, before quickly breaking out into a fast trot.

"Where you going chink?"

They were older boy, four of them, following him along. Perhaps fourteen or fifteen, they towered over Will. One of them, Devin, had been incredibly muscular. At the time he had been an up and coming junior boxer in the area, and had won a belt. His friends, who had

picked up a little bit of the training to better beat people up, were no slouches either. Whenever they weren't training at their gym they were terrorizing local neighborhoods, starting foods with rival gangs, robbing gas stations and

"Can you speak English China Man?"

Will optimistically had hoped that they would leave him alone. "Yes I can speak English."

It had been a mistake. He had stopped walking to answer the question, and they took the chance to surround him. They were punching their fists and staring at him intimidatingly. Will had felt himself go completely white. He couldn't bring himself to move.

"Shouldn't you at home pounding rice, China man?" Tyson Briggs had asked. "Ching chong chang."

The group laughed. Will felt his fear gave way to anger.

"Go home and suck each other's dicks. Leave me alone."

The group immediately stopped laughing. Will felt himself freeze.

"Do you think we're fags, Chinaman?" Devin said quietly. He was walking closely to her, his hands balled into fists. Will tried to back away, but before he could one of the boys came up from behind and wrapped his arms around his own in a hold. Will cried out in surprised as he fought and struggled to break free, but he could not even budge. The other boy was simply too big and strong.

Devin smashed him across the face with his fist. Will cried out as the blow sent his head flying backwards. It hit him right then and there that if Devin really wanted to, if he really wanted to cross that line, he could quite easily kill him.

"Stop!" Will blurted out. "Please!"

Devin smashed his hand against him again and he reeled. Tears were welling up in his eyes. He had never been so afraid; he had never been in so much pain. He had never been in a real fight before. All he could think of was how he wished he could look Devin

in the eye and call him a cocksucker again, but all he could manage was a low whimper.

Devin raised his fist again and smashed him so hard that his legs completely buckled. He hung limply in the arms of his attacker. His mind had gone completely blank. He wondered whether he was dead.

“Shit, drop him!”

The arms that were wrapped tightly around him suddenly unwound and allowed him to fall flat faced onto the concrete. He was barely able to break his fall with his arm. He lay there, barely registering the rapid footsteps that were approaching him as he blacked out.

He had woken up to the sound of a brief earnest discussion. He could not make out the words at first,

“Should I call an ambulance? I’m sure his parents are worried-“

“I want to talk to him first, we don’t know where he came from, it might inconvenience his family-“

Will found himself raising his hand to his head and let out an anguished moan of pain. The voices suddenly stopped, and he could feel them bending over to look at kid.

“Hey kid.” A man’s voice said. “You feeling alright?”

“No.” Will said. “I feel like my head is going to split open.”

“Do you feel nauseous at all? Are you dizzy?”

“No, my head just hurts.” Will muttered. He sat in place for a while, unable to even open his eyes. “Where am I?” He was lucid enough to tell that this wasn’t a hospital.

“Our place.” The man said. “You’ve only been out for a couple of minutes.” Will nodded. “Thanks.” He rasped. “My parents would have thrown a fit if I had been taken to the hospital.”

“What happened to you?” The second voice, a young woman’s, was soft and concerned. Will opened his eyes and set eyes on his rescuers for the first time.

The girl who had spoken was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He stared at her, open mouthed, as she stared at him through her beautiful black eyes.

"Kid?" The man spoke, and Will turned to face him. He was a big, tough looking guy that towered over the woman. He wore a bright red jacket and was staring at him with a considering gaze.

"I got beat up." Will said stiffly. "That's all." He made as if to sit up, and winced a little bit. The girl rushed in and gently pushed him back down.

"How are you feeling?" She asked him. "Do you need a doctor?"

"I don't think so…" Will muttered. "I think I just need to get some sleep…"

"Well, I'll call your parents and tell them to pick you up." The woman said. "Hang in there, alright?" She patted his arm affectionately, and the hairs on his arms suddenly stood on end as she smiled warmly at him before turning and walking out of the room.

Will was suddenly left alone with the older man. Despite the pain in his head, he was not so out of it to feel a strong sense of unease with the situation. He didn't know these people, and he didn't know this man. For all he knew he had been dragged into a sex dungeon and would be raped by this guy in front of a live studio audience. (He had seen Pulp Fiction for the first time just a week before) There was a very awkward silence.

"Who were those guys?" The man asked. Will tried to lean back into the couch, trying to make himself more comfortable.

"Just some local punks." He said. "They go around beating people up for the fun of it." The man gave a nod.

"Yeah I know the type." He said. "They think they're big men, taking advantage of the weak."

Will bristled. "I'm not weak-"

"I didn't mean it as an insult." The man said. "They had you outnumbered four to one, had years of weight and experience on

them. They went after because they knew they would win."

Will fell silent. He considered the man's words very carefully. He spoke like a man who knew exactly what he was talking about. "Who are you?" He asked, in a much more respectful tone. "I never thanked you for what you did for me."

The man smiled. He held out his hand to Will, who reached out and took it. Will winced. His grip was the hardest he had ever felt.

"My name is Jason." He said. "And you are?"

"Will Wei." Will said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." Jason was giving him a considerate look. Will wondered what was going through his mind. "What were you doing walking alone tonight?"

"Oh." Will cast his eyes to the side, unable to look at him. He had long ago developed an aversion to complaining about his parents to other people, especially strangers. Most of the kids in his class had taken to teasing him for having overbearing Chinese parents who desperately wanted their child to become an Asian child prodigy stereotype. His teachers simply saw him as lazy and undriven, and other adults he knew were unwilling to stand up to his parents on his behalf. Most seemed to feel that his parents were trying to prepare him for his adult life the best way they knew how, and that someday he would grow to appreciate that.

"I think." Jason said, after a brief pause. "That whatever you were doing you should stick to doing it in daylight. Stick with your friends or girlfriend. Don't go out alone if guys like that are wandering around-"

"Don't tell me what to do!"

Jason gave him a look as Will leaned forward, his hands on his knees, his hands balling into fists. He felt an intense wave of annoyance and frustration welling up within him. He had just had the tar beaten out of him, he had been stripped of his dignity, he had been forced to endure the humiliation, and this stranger was

trying to tell him what he needed to do next? The thought made his blood boil.

“You are not angry at me.” Jason said, his voice quiet, but firm. “You’re angry at yourself.”

It was not an accusing statement, but Will felt an intense wave of shame wash over him. He bent his head downward, staring down at his feet, not meeting Jason’s eye.

“What happened to you was terrible.” Jason said, his eyes never leaving Will’s head. “But that doesn’t mean you can take it out on me. The best thing you could have done tonight is stay at home and out of reach. You aren’t strong enough to go walking around by yourself at night-“

“But I want to be!” Will blurted out, unable to contain his thoughts anymore. “I wanted to hit them! I wanted to hurt them! I wanted to stand up for myself! I wanted-“

He faltered, as his eyes met Jason’s.

“I know.” Jason said heavily. “But you couldn’t possibly have won. You were outnumbered, you don’t know how to fight, they were older and bigger than you. There was nothing you could do.”

“But I don’t want that!” Will insisted, his frustration clear in his voice. “I wanted to do something- Anything!”

“The only thing you can do.” Jason said. “Is prepare.”

Will stared at him, at a complete loss for words.

“The thing to do right now is to decide what you want to do next.” Jason said. “You told me that you don’t want to run and hide. You want to be able to fight them. Is that right?”

Will did not hesitate. He nodded.

“I see.” Jason said. “Will, firstly- and this is very important- fighting is never going to solve all of your problems. At the end of the day, this never should have happened to you to begin with.”

Will had already opened his mouth to argue, but Jason quickly cut him off.

"Secondly." He said. "That doesn't change that fact that it did happen, and that it could happen again." Will's mouth tightened, the words dying in his mouth.

"How old are you, Will?"

"I'll be thirteen soon."

"Alright Will." Jason said. "Do you know what this place is?"

"Uh, your house?"

"Nah. It's my dojo."

"Dojo?"

"Yeah." Jason said. "I want to train people in martial arts. We just opened. How'd you like to learn how to fight from me?"

"Learn to-"

Will pushed himself up, wincing a little bit from the pain. "I… would love that!" Jason looked almost surprised at his enthusiasm, before giving him a wide smile.

They spent the next several minutes discussing the specifics. Jason was still building a list of students. Will was not the first to sign up, but he was by far the youngest and least experienced.

"It's going to take a lot of work." Jason told him. "I'm going to put you through your paces from day one. By the time you hit thirteen you'll be a changed man."

At that moment Reiko's head popped out from behind the sliding screen door. "Will, your Mother is here." She said warmly. She had seemed to be greatly amused by the turn of events. "I expect we'll see you soon?"

"Yeah!" Will said energetically, getting to his feet, pressing the pack of ice against his head. "Count on it!"

And he did come back. He had to fight his parents tooth and nail to get them to agree, he had to convince them that it wasn't Jason

who caused the massive blow to his head, he had to make a lot of promises to improve his grades and schoolwork.

For an hour and a half every day Jason would put him through his paces. Will found himself jumping up and down, learning how to position his body, learning calisthenics, learning how to hold his hand into a fist, learning how an enemy (Or Opponent) might approach and attack him. They went over possible scenarios, using the bullying incident as a base. What if there were more of them? Could you have taken one or two of them? Go for their weak spots. If they're not playing fair, why should you? Jason was a wonderful teacher.

By the end of the first day Jason had hooked him. Will came home positively ecstatic and beaming, even when his Father reprimanded him for not taking the time to study. The second day did not curb his enthusiasm. Or the third day. Or the fourth.

In fact, by the end of the first week Will found himself practicing completely unsupervised, outside of class. He would practice various kicks and blows before bed, he would do handstands on the playground. He found himself running as frequently as possible. People- his classmates, usually- would point and laugh at him, but he honestly did not even register it. All he could think of was getting back to the Dojo and learning more stuff.

"Ha!" He slammed his hand against the bag, sending it swaying back and forth. He hesitated, watching the bag move back and forth apprehensively. He struck again when the bag came back within his strike zone.

"You're going to need to become comfortable hitting things outside of your reach." Jason told him. "Footwork is the key. You probably should have tried to close the distance."

He demonstrated then. He punched the bag with incredible force, sending it flying backward, and then quickly stepped forward and smashed it again, before it could swing back down.

"Let's work on your footwork today." He said.

He stayed at the Dojo so late that Reiko took to bringing them meals. He and Jason would sit up long after the session had ended, talking about all manner of things. It did not take very long at all for Will to think of Jason as being one of his very close friends, despite the age difference between them. He was seven years older than Will, but that almost didn't even really matter. He could talk to Jason about anything.

"Where did you and Reiko meet?" Will asked, during one of their breaks, watching Reiko pour over books. She had been in the early stages of getting some sort of medical related degree, and she had surrounded herself with various charts showing off the human body. She also had a French history book sitting off to the side, for light reading. She had asked them to leave her alone while she did that, and Jason acquiesced. Will had noticed a sharp difference in the relationship between Jason and Reiko and his own parents. His own parents insisted on following arbitrary, hollow relationship rules. They would get each other gifts, they would spend time together, they would discipline their son, but they never seemed to enjoy it. Jason and Reiko, however, seemed to take solace in the occasional moment alone. They deeply cared about and respected each other. Even back in those early days, especially back in those early days, Will found himself envious. He had never had a girlfriend.

"It's a long story." Jason said, laughing. "But we went to the same school."

"You're nothing alike." Will had noticed this too. Although Reiko was learning martial arts as well, she was doing so rather casually. Her focus was primarily on academics. She was gentle and sweet, and did not seem at all like a good match for the rather rough Jason.

"I don't know about that." Jason said. "We've kind of rubbed off on each other over the years." He laughed. Will wasn't exactly sure what he had meant, but he made as if he understood.

Jason had been right. By the time he turned thirteen was build was completely different. His diet had already been clean, he simply had not put in the physical work required to really shine. He would never

forget the time he stared at himself in the mirror, unable to believe just how far he had come. That day he had come into the Dojo and worked harder than ever.

The mocking and teasing from his classmates gradually shifted into an awe and envy. He had gone from a small and rather unassuming boy to a rather fit, able bodied teenager. More than once he caught girls staring at him in class. To his pleasure Kimiko Ninagawa seemed to be one of them. It wasn't long after that that he approached her and told her how pretty she was. They were dating by the end of the day.

By the end of the first year, he had completely changed his life. And it was all because of Jason and Reiko.

"You're a great fighter Will." Jason said, snapping Will out of his nostalgia. "You shouldn't be worried. Honestly I'm a bit more concerned about your college education."

"I'm doing fine!" Will told him, hotly. Jason raised an eyebrow. Will sighed.

"I'm passing all my classes." He said grudgingly. "But I… I don't feel that spark. I don't feel a pull to any specific field or job. I'm only going because I thought I should go."

Reiko was nodding. "Yes, yes, that's becoming a problem." She said. "College isn't for everyone, Will…" She squeezed Jason's arm. He hadn't gone to school at all. "I dislike this notion that everyone has to go to college to become successful."

"But it can be a good thing too." Jason interjected. "So I wouldn't give it up just yet. You're being indecisive. You enjoy going, I can tell. You just don't know what you want yet. It'll come to you, don't worry."

"Do you want to come over for dinner, Will?" Reiko asked. "You can look over all my old books, if you like." Reiko had refused to resell her old college books and had started collecting them.

Will was tempted, but he shook his head. "No, I've got to get back." He said gloomily. "Maybe during break? I'm really very busy at the

moment.”

“Yes, we’ll talk about it over your next vacation.” Reiko promised. She raised her phone and started rapidly punching the screen. Most would assume she was texting, but Will knew her well enough that she was making a note to herself to keep her promise. “Keep thinking about it then, alright?”

“I will.” Will promised. “I’ll you later then?”

He waved goodbye and headed on back to his house. He climbed the stairs of the porch and stepped inside. Wolf was already inside, watching cartoons. He had gotten started drinking early today and bottles lined up either side of the couch that he had taken up entirely by himself.

He didn’t speak to Will, which suited him just fine. Will grabbed some green tea and made his way to his room. Although it wasn’t exactly neat, with some pens and old papers scattered around the place, it was at least free of the food crumbs and smell that permeated from Wolf’s room.

Will set his back by his desk, pulled out his chair, and hit the books. He stayed up for several hours, pouring over everything, making sure that he understood it all and that everything was done. It wasn’t until Wolf started blaring the sound of his pornography that Will decided it was time to turn in.

He took his earmuffs and slid them on before slipping into bed and almost immediately fell asleep. It was the last normal day of his life.

Will woke up the next day feeling extremely energetic and excited about what was to come. He stretched a little bit in bed, waking up his sleeping muscles, and then stepped out to their door. Wolf had once again eaten all the cookies, sweets, ice creams, pizza rolls, and drank all of the alcohol, but was thoughtful enough to leave behind some eggs and vegetables. Will made himself breakfast this time, humming to himself as he did so. Wolf did not come out of his room, so Will found himself cleaning up his own dishes, careful to leave the ones that Wolf had left behind untouched.

When he stepped out into the street he found himself really looking forward to the day. He managed to catch the bus on time and get to class with no issues. He tapped his pencil against his notepad thoughtfully as the Professor went through the lecture. This time they were covering topics he had already read up on. In fact he had just gone through it last night.

He had lunch with a friend and then studied together. He had to cut the session short since he had forgotten a book at home. He came home to find Wolf awake and angry.

"I missed another class!"

"Oh yeah?" Will knew better than to point out the obvious to him. Wolf spent fifteen minutes it took Will to find his missing book telling Will all about his problems with the college. How the Professors didn't like him and the classes were too hard and that it was too difficult to get up in the morning and how the girls were all sluts and how no one wanted to sleep with him and how annoying it was to go get more alcohol every couple of days. Will left the house immediately after finding his book, although it was still another hour until his next class.

He was feeling a little stressed. Wolf's ramblings had completely soured his mood. He decided to go for a walk. He made his way to the park that he had studied in the day before. Although it was a bright, clear, and pretty day, he somehow lost enthusiasm about halfway through. He disliked the notion of doing the same old thing. He had just gone to the park yesterday. Why not go somewhere else? Why not go on an adventure?

And with that thought, and nothing more, he turned in the opposite direction and headed down the street. He had never had reason to go down this way before. This section of campus was mostly devoted to the Arts, something that he had never interest in. Banners depicting adaptions of famous plays lined the side of buildings, and a guy with a guitar was sitting on a set of stairs practicing his music. Will stopped and listened for a while. He had never learned how to play himself.

Eventually he found himself making his way around the building. There was no one out this time of day. He imagined this area was mostly used for staff taking in materials into the buildings. He could see a garage large enough for giant trucks. He imagined that the Campus Staff would bring in set pieces and furniture in through this way, probably in the dead of night. Will stepped by the large doors, finding himself wondering what was inside them right now. There was a small, glass window, but it was too high for him, or anyone else for that matter, to see through. He wondered what the point of that was.

He was about to turn the corner and head back to the main road when a sound from behind him gave him pause. The large, white doors of the building were sliding open. He watched them with interest as the automatic doors rose up and slid neatly into their place above the garage floor. Even from this distance, Will could hear the blare of an engine starting up.

A large black van began to pull backwards out of the garage and spin around to the side. It was coming towards where Will was standing. He tried to glance inside the building to get a look as to what they had been delivering, but saw nothing but boring brown packaging and pieces of wood.

He was about to turn away when the van came tearing by. It was much too fast for such a small road, and Will found himself turning his head to watch as it went by.

The back side door of the van suddenly burst open.

A terrified looking, wide eyed girl was standing there, her arms completely bound by thick binds, her bare legs red and bruised, her hair wild and unkempt. She seemed to be Eurasian, like Reiko, although her hair was a bright brilliant blond that contrasted heavily against her Asian features. He had never seen such a horribly beaten up looking girl in his life.

He stepped forward, his arms raised towards her, unsure what to do as the girl quickly stepped out into the street, landing on her bare

feet. She cried out in pain as she staggered, her knee scraping the ground, before collapsing entirely, struggling vainly with her binds.

Will hurried over to her, worry overcoming his senses. She did not seem to notice him: She was lying on her side, struggling against her binds. She had in her hand, Will could see, some kind of sharp object. He looked down at noticed that her legs were covered in thick red abrasions. She had very recently been tied up.

Before Will could help her up, however, the van came to a screeching stop and whirled back around. The horn honked at him irritably, the driver clearly warning him to back off. Will looked at it, comprehension dawning on him. He did not know how or why, but these people had abducted this girl.

Instead of backing down he bent over the girl and roughly ripped at her binds. He grabbed the sharp object in her hand, which turned out to be a small knife, and helped rip her binds open. She stared up at him, openmouthed, as the remaining ropes fell away.

The van came to a stop feet away from them as he bent over and held out his hand to her. She stared up at him, still looking very terrified, and did not take it. He stared at her, trying to reassure her that it was alright, but he did not each down and grab her.

The doors of the van opened, and boots were touched down onto the concrete. Two older men, both dressed similarly in dark blue jackets, the same kind of work hat, and gray khakis.

The stepped quickly to her, their eyes apprehensively evaluating the situation. Will could tell at a glance that both men understood that things could turn out very ugly, but had no idea just what to do next.

“Get away from her!” One of the men, the one with a red beard, said sharply. Will stared at him, and did not move.

“I’m warning you, kid-“

The man stepped forward, brandishing his arm. Will stepped in front of the girl and protectively put his arm in front of her.. The man

froze. Will could tell at a glance that he had just been trying to intimidate him. He had no idea how to fight.

"Who are you people?" Will asked, his voice cold and furious. "Answer me!"

The men seemed to freeze up. Their eyes were flickering around the deserted lot. And then they seemingly relaxed, and began to advance towards him.

"Kid." The man said. "Look. Just step away and forget what you saw. Here…"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick wad of dollar bills. He held them out before him and shuffled through them with his fingers, showing Will that each and every one was a hundred dollar bill.

"Back off and its yours." The guy promised, smiling, holding out the bills to Will. He smiled warmly and threw the bills to the side. They hit the ground behind wall with a splash.

Will did not even turn around to look at them. He stared hatefully at the man, whose smile was slowly fading from his face.

They rushed him at once. The red headed man brought up his fits in a fighting gesture and tried to jab at Will's face. Although clearly tall and fairly muscular, his punch left a lot to be desired. Will easily avoided the attack and counter punched, sending a powerful hook to the man's jaw. He was out like a light. His friend, went for his eyes. He had a car key clenched in his hand and jabbed out with him, trying to jab him in the eye.

Will slapped the attack away with his hand, and grabbed hold of the man's wrist, twisting it violently in his palm. The man gasped in pain as Will cruelly twisted it so hard that it brought the man to his knees. He brought up his leg and kicked at the back of the man's head, sending him slamming into the concrete.

The door to the van opened. A third man, presumably the driver, stepped out. He was holding a large, wooden baseball bat, and was brandishing it threateningly in front of him. Will stared him down, his

hands clenched into fists as the man approached. The girl at his feet, who had still not moved, let out a low moan.

"Don't make me break your legs." The man warned, as he brandished the bat in front of him. Will snorted.

"Try me."

The man brought back the bat and swung with a vicious, clobbering blow. The bat gave him extra reach, and would bash open his head open if he allowed it to touch. However the man had swung with such power and force that he had to wind back to attack him again.

Will closed the distance with incredible speed and ripped the bat from his hands. The man cried out as Will raised the handle of the bat and smashed it across his face. One, twice, three times. By the second blow blood was pouring out of his head as he lay on the concrete.

Will spat on him, wiping his own mouth as he tossed the bat aside. He turned back around to the girl and made his way over to her. She cried out, flinching as she tried to crawl away from him. He stared down at her pitifully. She was so thin and so weak that it seemed that merely moving was a bit of an ordeal for her.

"Hey." He said quietly, his voice soft and reassuring as he bent over her, holding out his hand to her again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She stared at him, looking somewhat doubtful. Will suspected that she had been told that many times in the past, and had learned to distrust those words. He decided to say something that she had probably never heard before.

"We need to go to the police."

That got her attention. But rather than calm her down, as he had hoped, she suddenly became angry. "No police!" She barked. "No!"

Her accent was a thick, eastern European one. She spoke like someone who barely understood how to speak English. Will stared at her, unable to make sense of what she was saying.

“What do you mean?” He asked. “Why don’t you want to see the police?”

“No Police! No!” She was pleading with him, pushing herself away from him with her hands and feet. Will glanced down and noticed once more the large red welts were running across her legs and arms. She had been bounded hand and foot, and rather tightly. She must have somehow cut herself free at the legs, and tried to make a run for it.

“What happened to you?” He asked, his voice softening, as he kneeled down to get a better look at her. She stared at him, wide eyed, but was seemingly unable, or unwilling, to answer. Will came to a decision.

“Come on.” He said, as he held out his hand to her. “We need to get you off the street.” She stared at his hand, seeming very apprehensive. Will smiled at her reassuringly.

Behind him one of the men on the ground stirred, letting out a harsh moan. Will turned sharply, his hand balling into fists. The man didn’t move again.

By the time he turned back to the girl, he found her holding out her hand to him, staring up at him imploringly. He smiled, and took hold of it.

She was very light, possibly less than a hundred pounds. He was able to hoist her off the ground with no trouble at all, although she stumbled once she got to her feet. She fell forward, placing her hands against his chest for support.

“Can you walk?” Will asked her, careful not to spook her with any sudden movements. She paused, as if trying to make sense of the situation, before slowly shaking her head.

“Alright.” Will said. “Get on.” He turned around and bent over, patting his back. She stared at him for a moment, as if not understand what he was getting at. It was not until he took her hands and guided them around his neck that she understood.

She managed to clamber on and cling tightly to his back. She pressed her head against his head and sighed. She seemed almost completely exhausted. Will felt himself tighten up. They needed to go to the police, but she had asked him not to. She must have had some kind of reason, and he didn't want to want to upset her. . He had to go somewhere close by. Somewhere quiet, to someone that he could trust. Someone like Jason.

He set off, the girl tightly gripping his back. No one stopped and paid any attention to them. Doubtless most people assumed the girl had been in some kind of accident or he had lost some kind of bet. The girl seemed to feel some form of unease, however. Will could feel her shifting about uncomfortably, gripping his shirt tightly in her hands.

It was not long until Will found himself standing in front of Jason's dojo. Although it was not open for the day just yet, the door was unlocked. Will opened the door and stepped in.

"Hello?" Will called out into the room, looking around anxiously. "Jason?"

"Will?"

It was not Jason, but Reiko. She stepped out of the hall, towel in hand. She seemed to have been in the middle of her own training, as she was wearing her things. She stopped partway through the hallway, blinking owlishly as she took in the sight of Will and the girl on his back. "What-"

"Do you have anywhere she can lie down?" Will asked her quietly. "I'll explain later."

Without another word, Reiko turned and led him back down the hallway, towards the room they had set aside for accidents or sudden bouts of sickness. Will laid the girl on the couch as Reiko bustled about with the nearby sink, drawing a cup of into a little Styrofoam cup.

"Who-" Keiko began, as she tried to hand the cup over to the girl. The girl stared at her, unmoving. Reiko lowered the cup to her side

and set it down on the table next to her.

“What’s happened?” She asked Will quietly. “Who is this?”

Quickly, in hushed tones, Will began to explain the story. How he had decided to go for a walk around campus. How he had noticed the van. How he had seen the girl come bursting out of the van, and how the men with her had tried to bribe him to walk away. Reiko did not interrupt during the explanation, but her lips grew thinner and more tight. By the end she looked angry.

“I know it’s hard to believe-“

“There’s nothing hard to believe about it.” Reiko said shortly. “Just look at her.” She tilted her head towards the girl, who was still sitting on the couch, her hands folded in front of her. She had not touched the water. Will felt his heart seize up.

“Has she spoken at all?” Reiko asked quietly. Will shook his head.

“Not much.” He admitted. “She told me not to talk to the police, but other than that-“

“She told you not to go to the police?” Reiko asked sharply. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” Will said, alarmed. “But that’s all she really said to me.” Reiko did not him any more questions. She turned and made her way back to the girl. The girl let out a surprised squeak as she approached, causing Reiko to stop in place. She stood there for a moment, staring at her, before slowly kneeling down over her.

“Hello.” Reiko said, her bright soft and warm. “My name is Reiko. What’s yours?”

The girl stared at her, her eyes never leaving her face. Reiko stared back. She did not speak again, but she did not make any aggressive movements either. Eventually the girl broke the look and stared straight ahead.

“English…” She murmured. “No…”

Reiko blinked, surprised, as she met Will’s eyes. “She doesn’t speak English.” She said, surprised. “She looks like she’s from Asia,

considering her accent and her body type. Let's see if we share a language."

"Um…" She looked back down at her, taking in her facial features and physique. *"Do you speak Japanese?"*

The girl's head shot up. She stared at Reiko with a look of surprise and a little bit of joy.

"Hai."

Reiko turned to look at Will and gave him a bright smile. "Okay, now we're getting somewhere." She said brightly. Will nodded, finding himself at a loss for words at Reiko's abilities. She turned back to the girl and brushed her hair with her hand, smiling.

"My name is Reiko." Reiko said, placing a hand on her chest. "*What is your name?"*

The girl hesitated. Her eyes flittered in between the two of them. She seemed somewhat at a loss for words.

"I am… Alice." She said, her voice quiet. Will could barely make it out from where he stood.

"Alice." Reiko repeated. "What a lovely name." She turned and glanced at Will. *"My friend told me what happened. Are you alright?"*

The girl visibly winced. Will saw her hands fold up and clench in her lap. She looked drained, and exhausted.

"No. I am not alright."

Reiko turned to look at Will again. She looked about ready to cry. "Something's happened to her." She hissed. "Something truly horrible… I can tell."

"Is she willing to explain?"

Reiko turned back to Alice and posed the question. The girl shivered. Her bare toes curled and clenched. She looked deeply uncomfortable, and did not answer.

"Where did she come from?" Will asked immediately. "How old is she? How long was she with them? How-"

“I don’t think she’s willing to answer just yet, Will.” Reiko interjected, as she stood up straight, still giving her a pitiful look. “Look at her. She’s been through an ordeal. She needs rest, and to be looked after. She’s in no state to answer questions.”

Reiko paused. “I fear that she’s suffered in ways that no woman ought to.” She said. Will felt his desire to fight her decision die in his throat. He stared at them both for a while, Reiko with her hand on the rest of the couch, protectively blocking a little of the completely still Alice from view.

“I understand.” Will said, his voice quiet. “I... trust your judgement, Reiko.”

She smiled at him. It was a beautiful smile, but somehow very sad. “Please come back tomorrow.” She said. “To see her, at the very least.” Will glanced down at the back of Alice’s head. Her long, rather unkempt blonde hair fell back down the side of her head. He felt a strong desire to see this thing through to the end.

“I will.” Will promised.

When he stepped out of the dojo, his things in tow, he found himself thinking deeply about the situation. How he had first seen Alice, how he had jumped to her rescue, how he had beaten the shit out of her assailants with his bare hands.

He had no idea who those men were or what they would be prepared to do. He was convinced none of them would think to look for Alice at the Dojo, but he was certain they would reasonably assume that he was a student and search for him on Campus. Although there were plenty of Chinese students here, few were as tall as he was, and fewer still were trained fighters. It would be very easy to find him, if they put their minds to it.

He began to wonder if he had made a mistake bringing Alice to Reiko. If either she or Jason suffered because of this, he didn’t know whether or not he could handle it. He would need to speak about this to Jason, when they had a chance.

His thoughts continued onwards along those lines as he went home, set down his back, and began to cook dinner. He realized idly that he had missed his second class of the day. He dismissed the thought immediately. He had done the right thing. What was he supposed to do, just take the girl in with him? He amused himself with the image of himself dragging a beat up Alice into class and setting her on his desk, like some kind of demented piece of art.

Wolf came into the house, crashing through the front door like he always did. He was already bitching about his day to Will before he had even taken off the jacket.

"The girl said NO to me, you believe that? She tried to tell me that she doesn't like Marvel when she had a little Deadpool pin on her bag-" He had already stepped past Will to reach for his beer in the refrigerator. "God I hate college." He said, "Nothing ever goes my way." He burped and moved away towards the TV, and booted up a cartoon. Will barely registered him. He was barely thinking of anything other than Alice, and what might become of her. Surely Reiko wouldn't want to keep her there in the Dojo for the long term. Would Alice live with them in their place? Or would she go elsewhere? He had heard of places that victims of abuse could go for help and recovery. He hoped that they could find one for her, one that she would be happy with.

He was still thinking about Alice as he opened up his school books and looked at the pages. Although he could see the words and make them out, he wasn't truly registering them. His mind would not leave the Alice situation alone. He was restless. So restless, in fact, that he could not bring himself to sleep either. He lay awake, staring up at the ceiling, trying to think. Trying, trying to think about his next step.

His dreams were just as uneasy and reckless. He saw himself shifting through crowds of men that were walking around him in all directions. He could not make out their faces, but he could see that each and every one of them was dressed in the same uniform as the men who had he had fought. A growing sense of unease built up within him as he pushed through the crowd of people, staring wildly

around for a glimpse of Alice among the crowd. He could make out her head bobbing in between the sea of faces., but as he tried to get closer for a better look she seamlessly blended back into the crowd. Will continued to push forward, but the crowd, which had been passively allowing him to move about relatively freely., started pushing back against him. Will let out a yell as Alice disappeared among the sea of people.

He awoke in the dark, staring wildly at the ceiling. He was sweating a little. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to relax. He was getting carried away. He was thinking about this too much. It wasn't that big of a deal. For all he knew, Reiko had the situation well in hand. She was the smartest person he knew.

Despite his attempts at reassuring himself, he was still fretting over the situation as he climbed out of bed and ate a light breakfast. A banana and some toast. He was tempted to call Jason, or Reiko, and ask them what was going on. He wanted to go straight down to the Dojo first thing and get right back into the thick of things. Instead he packed up his things and headed off to class. He found himself barely able to concentrate throughout the entire thing. The girl he was sitting next to kept shooting him dirty looks as he kept glancing at the clock, unable to even bring himself to take notes. He was the first out the door, and now that he had a bit of time he headed straight to the dojo.

Both Jason and Reiko were waiting for him.

"We thought you'd get here first chance you got." Jason said, grinning, as Will made his way towards them.

"Where is she?"

"Asleep." Reiko confided in him. "I didn't want to move her… she's so stressed." She looked rather stressed herself. Her usually neat black hair was somewhat frizzled, and Will could see little rings under her eyes. She had likely not gotten much sleep last night. Will suddenly felt very bad for what he had done. He should never have let her take the brunt of responsibility for the situation.

“Stressed?” Will asked, his voice low. “How do you mean?”

Reiko cast a look towards the hallway where they had taken Alice last night. “Well…” She hesitated. “She’s been through a lot.”

“I figured.” Will said dryly. “Getting kidnapped isn’t easy on you, Reiko.”

“Oh, I know that.” Reiko said hastily. “It’s just…” She glanced at Jason and then bit her lip. “I’m convinced that she wasn’t just… picked up off the street in the past couple of days.”

“What?”

“What I mean to say is,” Reiko said hastily, amending her statement. “She is not American. She was not brought her of her own will. She’s led a life under lock and key for a very, very long time.”

“What?” Will’s brow furrowed. “What makes you say that?”

“Her behavior.” She said simply. “Her mannerisms. The way she speaks to me.” Her eyes flashed. “And the assumptions she made about you.”

“Huh-“

“This is a woman who has never seen a genuine kindness in her entire life.” Reiko said. “She honestly could not understand why you had come to help her, and why you had brought her here.” She flushed. “She… um, assumed the worst, if you catch my meaning.”

“I don’t, actually.”

Jason leaned in. “She thought she was going from one terrible situation to another.” He said. “She thought that Reiko was just preparing her for more sexual abuse.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “She’s been abused?”

“Yes.” Reiko said, looking angry. “I imagined that was the case when I first saw her, obviously, but I’m completely sure of it now. She has been abused, and very often. She doesn’t like being in a room alone with Jason, and won’t open up to me at all about what’s happened

to her.” Reiko grimaced. “She thinks I’m simply preparing her for something horrible.”

Will stared at her.

“It’s not uncommon for the porn industry to use female employees to make prospective female stars feel at ease.” Reiko went on. “My assumption, going by her behavior anyway, is that she is usually attended to by women before… well, she’s used.” Her lips had gone very tight. “She still hasn’t spoken to me much at all.”

“She’s a complete wreck.” Jason told Will. “I think anyone would tell you that much.”

“I thought the same.” Will admitted. “Who could have done this to her?”

“That’s just it.” Reiko said, her voice grim. “We don’t know.”

“It could have been anyone.” Jason said, his arms crossed. “And she hasn’t given us any names.”

Will glanced down the hall, his thought spinning in his head. “Does she not know who these people were?” He asked. “Or is she still not talking?”

“We’re not sure.” Reiko answered. “Um, I mean to say that she isn’t being very specific. She won’t even ask me for food or water. It’s like… she’s afraid of me.”

“Afraid of you?” Will repeated, bemused. “You’re like five feet tall.” Jason smirked, but Reiko looked annoyed.

“Oh thanks.” Reiko huffed. . “I’m trying, but she hasn’t opened up to me just yet. Let’s give it a couple of days.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

Reiko faltered. Her eyes flickered upward towards Jason. His expression was hard and unmoving.

“Until we understand the exact reason why she specifically asked not to be turned over.” He said. “I think it would be best that we did not.”

Will stared at him. Reiko shuffled about awkwardly, not meeting his eye. “There could be all manner of explanations.” Jason went on. “She could naturally distrust the police. Perhaps because of something that happened to her as a child. Or perhaps… they were involved somehow.”

“Oh come on.” Will said, a little skeptical. “There’s no reason to assume that-“

“From what we know, yes.” Jason said. “But we know very little.”

“What are you saying?” Will asked slowly. It did not escape his attention that Jason was not being entirely honest about his reasoning. There was something he did not want to tell him.

“Jason…” Reiko murmured. “Jason thinks we should wait until Alice is in a state to explain the situation to us before deciding what to do.” She looked somewhat uncomfortable and uneasy as well. Will frowned. He could not understand what either of them were thinking.

“Are you sure that’s okay?” He asked. “I mean, surely there’s someone we can talk to-“

“Whoever was holding this girl.” Jason said. “Has a considerable amount of power and influence. You saw how that guy tried to bribe you to walk away. You saw how they were coming out of a college building. I think someone higher up at the University must be responsible for this.” Will’s skepticism deepened. The University was currently undergoing a campaign fighting back against sexual assault. He found it very hard to believe that anyone at the University would involve themselves in something like this. He thought he needed another opinion.

“What do you think, Reiko?” Will asked. Reiko touched her arm and looked away from him.

“Well….” She hesitated. “I don’t disagree that there’s something going on here. That van did come out of a Campus Building. But I feel as if… well, we shouldn’t jump to conclusions.” She looked extremely anxious. “Honestly I don’t know what to think.”

He wondered what was going on here. They wouldn't be pushing so hard for this without good reason.

"Alright." Will said. "We don't call the police. For now." He sighed, pressing his hand against his forehead. "But Jason… what are we going to do?"

They gave a small start as a small scuffling sound hit their ears. They turned to the hallway to find Alice standing there in the door, her hand on the handle, blinking out at them. Reiko hurriedly made her way over to her, hurriedly speaking in Japanese. Alice glanced upwards, and upon seeing Will, quickly backed away into the room. Reiko gave one last worried look back at them before stepping inside.

Will looked back at Jason, a concern he had briefly had during the exchange brimming to the surface. "Are you and Reiko fighting?"

"Fighting?" He repeated, blankly. "Nah, we're just stressed." He certainly didn't look it. He seemed relatively calm and composed. "Don't worry about it. We've been through worse."

"Hey, I'm sorry for getting you involved-"

Jason waved his hand at him dismissively. "Don't be." He said. "We want to be involved. We're just as concerned as you are."

Will grimaced, turning his head to the ground.

"I couldn't sleep last night." He admitted. "I was so worried." Jason nodded, his eyes running over Will's face.

"Yeah, I thought you looked a little worn out." He said. "Don't lose sleep over her, alright? The worst is over. We are going to resolve this."

Will felt himself relax a little bit at his words.

"Alright." He said. "I'll hold you to that, okay?"

Jason laughed, and held out his hand. "Okay!"

Will turned around to see Reiko coming back to them. This time she was joined by Alice. Reiko had her hands on her shoulders and was

almost pushing her towards them. She stood there awkwardly before them; her hands folded in front of her.

"Uh…?" Will said, as he met her eyes. "Hello?"

Alice lowered her eyes, before bowing her head to him.

"Arigato."

And then she hurriedly stepped away, back to her room. She slammed the door shut behind her. Will stared at her, open mouthed. Reiko giggled.

"Uh, arigato to you too." Will muttered, looking a little sheepish. "I mean-"

He gave a start as his eyes fell on the clock over the door. "Shit!" He cried. "I'm going to be late for class!"

He burst out into a sprint and made his way to the door. He almost pushed it open and leapt out into the street, but he turned around to give one last wave at Jason and Reiko.

"Look after her, alright?" He cried. "I'll be back tonight!"

They smiled and waved him off. Jason wrapping his arm around Reiko as they did. Will grinned to himself as he burst out of the door and hit the concrete. For the second time in three days he found himself pounding along the sidewalk, desperately trying to reach his next class.

Although he had found himself reassured about the situation after his talk with Jason, he still found it difficult to concentrate. The lack of real sleep the night before was really nagging at him, and he found himself drifting off all throughout the lesson. Once again the Professor was giving him dirty looks and Will privately began to think he was being singled out. He was yawning as he stepped out into the hallway at the end of class. He was unusually tired today… he decided it would be best to go home and have a nap.

Wolf was home on the couch. He had not seemed to have moved from where he had been when Will had left. He seemed miserable and teary eyed. Will chose not to bother him as he stepped into his

room and collapsed on the bed. He napped for several hours, and got up again in time for his next class. This time his head was filling a little bit clearer. This time he was physically able to pay more attention.

But by this point his mind was on Alice again. He could think of nothing else as the professor spoke of more of the same kind of equations this time. Although he knew and understand the material he could not bring himself to focus, and when class was dismissed he found himself quickly heading out the door, bag swinging over his shoulder, as he made his way straight back to the dojo. He ignored his usual route of walking around the park beforehand and cut straight through.

He was surprised to find Reiko waiting for him at door. "Come in." She said, smiling. "I've just made tea!"

They stepped past the dojo where Jason was in the middle of another class to the backroom. A small meeting room that was typically used for discussing the business was back here. It was quite neat and orderly: Reiko kept it in good condition.

A small spread of fruits and vegetables sat on the table before them, along with a jug of tea. Alice was staring at her paper plate absently, as if she had never seen one before. Will felt his throat tighten in his chest. She did not look up at them as they entered the room. It was not until the door shut behind them that she looked up. She looked momentarily frightened.

"Hey Alice." Will said cautiously, unwilling to come any closer to her out of fear that she might panic. "Are you doing any better?"

Alice turned her head back down to the plate but did not answer him. Will was about to pose another question when Reiko gently laid a hand on his arm.

"Will…" She said softly, tilting her head towards Alice. He fell silent, watching her carefully. She had been cleaned and dressed in new clothes since he had last seen her. But she still had that distant expression that made her look as if she were from another planet. It

was similar to that expression that thots had in their everyday life. That vacant, emotionless gaze known as the 'Thousand Cock Stare.' But unlike those girls, who had willingly chosen that kind of lifestyle and were now paying the price, Will felt a strong sense of pity for her.

"How's she been doing?" He asked her quietly, his eyes still focused on her. She was not paying attention to them: her eyes had remained downcast.

"About the same." Reiko told him. "We haven't been able to get anything out of her."

Will let out an annoyed sigh. Reiko gave him an understanding smile.

"Is she ever going to-"

"I don't know." Reiko said quietly, her eyes now on her too. "She doesn't eat much and just sorts of… sits there. We've been locking her in the break room and watching her through our security feed, but she doesn't move much at all."

She smiled grimly. "She does look quite a bit more relaxed when we're not there, though." She said. "Simply being around people makes her uneasy. My guess is that she was mostly kept in isolation when she wasn't being used."

Will wrinkled his lips. "Used…" He repeated. "You make her sound like an object." Reiko gave him a sad look.

"To them that's all she was." She gestured to the door and led him back out again. Will shot Alice one last look before Reiko gently shut the door behind her.

"The main thing right now is to get her to ease up." Reiko told him, as she locked the door behind her. "She needs to understand she's in safe hands, and that's going to require time. I think we can keep her here for now. She doesn't bother anyone, and we won't let her wander off."

"Right." Will said, nodding.

“But we need to be there for her.” Reiko stressed. “As much as possible, for as long as it takes for her to recover and decide for herself what she wants to do next.”

“It doesn’t feel like we’re making much progress.” Will admitted. Reiko grinned at him.

“It does seem that way, does it?” She asked. “But give it time.”

“Are you ready?”

They turned to find Jason standing near the door, smiling widely at them. Will stepped forward.

“Yeah!” He said, pumping his fist. Struck with a sudden idea, he turned to Reiko. “Hey, maybe Alice can watch. So she knows what you do here. Maybe that’ll help her feel more relaxed!”

“Maybe.” Reiko said, sounding amused. “Go on ahead. I’ll bring her over.”

Will and Jason spent a very enjoyable two hours running through their drills. Regularly Reiko and Alice would come by and watch them for minutes at a time, Reiko rapidly speaking to Alice in Japanese as she stood quietly by, before stepping off again. They did this several times during their sparring, and Will was beginning to question the logic behind it. Perhaps she was simply trying to make her feel more comfortable?

He barely had time to think about it, though. Jason was putting him through the ringer today, as he always did, and Will found himself struggling to keep up. Jason had been aggressively training to fight since he was very young. That, coupled with his age and size, made him incredibly intimidating to most people. Will, who felt he knew Jason better than anyone besides his wife, still felt a strong sense of fear whenever he saw one of Jason’s attacks coming towards him.

It was, however, a big part of the reason he had developed so much over the past seven years. By the time they were finished, Will had almost completely forgotten about the strange girl in the other room. Jason grinned at him as he raised his hand to his head, wiping away a bead of sweat.

“Always getting better.”

“I could say the same about you.”

Jason laughed, but Will was being completely serious. He had always felt that Jason was a great fighter, and as he grew in experience that fact became more and more clear to him. More than that, though, was the feeling that Jason was still continuing to grow and improve, even now that he owned his own dojo. The realization surprised him, somewhat. The movies tended to not really emphasize the fact that the Master put in work too.

Will looked away from him to find Alice and Reiko staring at them through the doorway. He waved at them without even thinking about it, smiling widely. Reiko smiled and waved back, but Alice, almost as if by instinct, pulled back behind the door, hiding from sight.

Will lowered his hand, frowning. “What was that about?” He asked Jason. Jason was frowning, clearly thinking over the situation.

“She’s probably not used to people being so nice to her.” He said.

The thought saddened him. Will turned back to face the women again, but Reiko had grabbed Alice’s shoulder and was beginning to lead her away. Will almost found himself stepping after them, but Jason stopped him before he could.

“Leave it for now.” He advised. “Get cleaned up, but say goodbye before you go.”

Will nodded and made his way to the shower room. He cleaned up, as quickly as he was able, and changed into a fresh set of clothes. He stepped out into the room to find Jason standing there with Reiko and Alice.

“Well Will.” Reiko said brightly, as she touched Alice’s shoulder warmly. “It was nice seeing you today. I hope you’ll drop by tomorrow as well.”

“Of course.” Will said, his eyes flickering over to Alice. She was looking very nervous and uneasy. “Like always.”

“We’ll see you later then, okay?” Reiko chirped, giving him a wide smile. Will smiled at them one last time before he stepped out into the street.

Will did not go home right away. He chose to take a detour through the park again and enjoy the campus at this later hour. The sun was beginning to set by now and a lot more people were casually strolling about. Chatting, playing games, discussing politics on blankets in the grass. He walked along the pavement through the park, trying to take his mind off of things. He could not obsess over Alice all the time: The situation was well in hand; she was safe, and she would be able to talk about her past. She and Reiko shared a language, so surely it would not be too much longer until she opened up…

Will cast a look behind him, where an older man with a newspaper was sitting hunched over, glaring at something on the page. Will tried to amuse himself by imagining just what the man was so intently looking at. “Mysterious Japanese girl gone missing, if found contact authorities, no matter what she tells you.”

All of his thoughts just ended up circling around back to Alice. Will sighed and turned away from the man as he stepped down the sidewalk, his head bent. He was beginning to get lost in thoughts now. He was beginning to wonder just what his role in this whole Alice business was. It was beginning to effect his life. He needed to cool down, find something to distract himself with, find something else to get involved in before things got out of hand. If he kept skipping classes he was going to fall behind, and that was the last thing he wanted.

He decided that he would try and have a little fun tonight. He had been so committed to his routine that he had not taken the time off to relax in a long, long while. But what was he to do? His idea of a good time was training at Jason’s, but that was out of the question. He had just come from there, and the last thing he wanted to do was think about Alice.

Going home was out of the question too. It was impossible to do anything without Wolf breathing down your neck, exploding your ears with complaints about his life and asking for advice on how to fix it that didn't involve hard work and exercise. So that was out too. Studying would be too stressful, and there were no good movies playing.

Or were there?

Out of sheer curiosity and a lack of interest in doing anything else, Will found himself standing in front of the theater staring up at it warily. He disliked watching movies without friends, and often did not pick what to watch. Usually he just went to see whatever was big at the time. He found himself picking a film at random.

It was not a new movie: It had something to do with gangsters and crime. It was probably a classic, but Will again felt that he was simply too distracted to enjoy it. Thoughts of Alice kept drifting into his head, and when the main detective cried out the victim's name in anguish, Will almost was a little confused. He had somehow convinced himself that the victim was named Alice, despite clearly being a much older woman in her mid-twenties.

He left the theater in a daze. He ignored the giggling girls casting looks in his direction as he stepped past them and back out into the street. This was getting ridiculous. He was simply unwilling to let himself be distracted. He felt unfulfilled and uneasy: He did not like the idea of just sitting around doing nothing while there was still work to be done. He came to a stop in the street, staring straight ahead, deep in thought.

He came to a decision right then and there. He found himself turning around and heading back to where he should have been all along. Back to the Dojo.

Jason and Reiko were sitting in the front, talking quietly among themselves as he banged on the locked door. They jumped up, as if shocked by the sudden noise, before whirling around to face them. He waved at them through the glass, and their expressions calmed

somewhat. Reiko got to her feet and tiptoed to the door. She unlatched it, and cracked it open.

"Will?" She asked, as she held it open. "What on earth…?"

"I want to help." Will told her bluntly, his voice brimming with passion. "I want to get to the bottom of this. I don't want to just wait for it to be resolved. I want to know who this girl is, and where she came from."

Reiko was staring at him. He had never spoken like this to her in his life before.

"I can't just let it be." He told her. "I can't."

Jason had stayed sitting where he was. He slowly got to his feet as he stared at Will, evaluating him. It was a surprisingly cold, calculating expression. Will had never seem him looking at him in that way before.

"Will." Jason said. "Think about what you're saying. "You are in school and have your own life ahead of you. You need to focus all of your energy on your future. Alice is going to be fine, Reiko and I-"

Will was already shaking his head.

"No." He said. "No, I know what I want. I know that I can't leave this alone. I don't want to. I want to help this girl, I want to be here, I want to help." His hand was clenching into a fist. "If I left this alone…. I wouldn't be accomplishing what I wanted to accomplish. I wouldn't make a difference in the world. And if I did that- if I stood by, and did nothing, then everything I've done so far would be for nothing."

He raised his fist in front of him.

"I WILL help her!"

Reiko and Jason were staring at him. Will almost felt that in another situation he might have been embarrassed about how emotional he was. Embarrassed at how passionate he was about a girl he didn't know.

When Reiko spoke, it was gentle and reassuring.

“Will.” She said. “You truly have grown into a wonderful man. I- and Jason too- are proud of you.” She looked almost as if she were about to cry. “Yes… Jason? Do you think…?”

Jason nodded as she wiped at her eyes. “I think so.” He said. “He’s just as involved as we are. If not more so. I think we should tell him.”

Reiko turned and smiled at him, but Will found himself bothered.

“Tell me?” He repeated. “Tell me what?”

Reiko stepped towards Jason and grabbed his hand.

“Everything we know.” Jason said quietly. “Everything she’s told us. You have a right to know. We didn’t want to distract you and pull you from your studies, but if we’re right-“

“Please.” Reiko interjected. “Let us take a seat.”

She gestured to the large comfortable arm chairs and they sat. Jason and Reiko on one side, Will on the other. Although he quite liked these chairs, Will could not find himself sinking back into it. He sat on the edge of the seat, staring at the two almost accusingly. They had often sat in this very spot talking of much more pleasant topics, but today the mood felt much more serious.

“Have you been keeping things from me?”

“Well-“ Reiko began, but Jason shushed her.

“No.” Jason said. “We were always planning on telling you all of the details. All of our ideas and what Alice has told Reiko. However we thought- we thought that it might not be the best idea to tell you everything. At least not at first. We hoped that you would stay of this situation, and not continue to get involved.” He smiled ruefully. “I see now that was a mistake. We treated you like a child. Forgive us… We’ve known you since you were twelve.”

“Thirteen.” Will corrected, annoyed. Reiko let out a giggle..

“Oooooh, were you that old?” She teased. “You were so small back then. You’ve grown so much.”

Jason grinned as well, but more at Will's scowl than his wife's joke.

"There is, of course, a reason we thought it might not be the best idea to get you involved." Jason said. "As I mentioned to you the other day, Alice is clearly not the victim of a random abduction. Her kidnappers were well trained and willing to fight to protect her, she is foreign, they had money and resources and the capacity to use a university building to store the vehicle they were transporting her in."

Jason's eyes hardened.

"What I didn't tell you was what I think this all means." He said. "We are dealing with rich, powerful people who are utilizing university resources for sex trafficking."

There was silence in the room. It was getting dark now and the room was being cast into shadow. Will was beginning to only make out the shapes of their faces.

"Sex trafficking?" He repeated, turning the idea on his head. "That's ridiculous."

"Why?" Jason repeated bluntly.

"Well…" Will started, his mind whirling. "Someone would figure it out, right? Someone would expose it? This isn't a big town, there isn't really a way to hide something like that."

"This kind of thing happens everywhere, all over the world." Reiko said sadly. "It isn't unheard of, even in this country."

"But it's illegal."

Jason let out a hollow laugh. "You think that stops them?" He asked. "No, it's everywhere all right. And my guess is that you stumbled across it right here on campus."

He turned to Reiko. "Do you still have it? The clippings."

She turned to the table beside her and held out a handful of newspaper clippings to Will. They were neatly cut and bound together. Will glanced over them.

“What are these?”

“How about you try reading it, college kid.”

And so he did.

An incident last evening has the entire community abuzz. Following a strange accident while in the middle of a delivery, a truck was forced to stop in the middle of the road. A young man of Chinese heritage approached the driver and demanded that he give up his money. When the driver refused the man beat him within an inch of his life. If you have any information please call the number below.

Will flipped the page.

A young girl suffering from a rare disease has gone missing. She does not speak English and reports indicate that she is deep distress. If you have any information please call the number below.

“What is this?” Will asked quietly, as he scanned the pages more carefully.

“Don’t you get it, Will?” Jason asked. “It’s the news. They’re trying to identify you and find the girl.”

Will’s eyes shot upward and narrowed. “What?”

“See, technically all of this technically happened.” Jason explained, as he pointed at the newspaper clippings. But they’re leaving out key details… they’re not mentioning that the missing girl was the package. For all the public knows these are two completely different, unrelated stories. But I noticed how much they lined up with yours.”

“And I’ve been asking around campus.” Reiko said, her voice quiet. “All anyone has been talking about is the attack.”

“No one’s said anything to me about it.” Will said, surprised.

“Give it time.” Jason said. “You probably haven’t spoken to anyone since it happened, right?” Will paused, before giving a nod. Jason nodded back. “I thought so.” He said. “You didn’t say anything about it, and I was worried that I was overthinking it, but I’m not liking the way things are looking. Not at all.”

“The people who did this.” Jason continued. “Must have ties to the university and are controlling how the story is being handled by the media.”

Will was shaking his head. “No, that’s ridiculous.” He said again, as he stood up. “The University wouldn’t do that. You’re making it sound like they’re… part of some grand conspiracy, or something.” He began to pace, his mind racing. “I think…” He said again. “That they must have gotten the wrong idea. Or they don’t know. I certainly don’t think they’re complicit…”

He turned to face Jason.

“The people who reported the attack.” He said. “Would be the men who I beat up. Right? Of course they would try and spin the story. And the media probably picked up on that. And now they think some crazy Chinese guy is going around shaking down delivery truck drivers.”

“Will…” Reiko said, hesitating somewhat. “We’ve been asking around, and we don’t like what we’re hearing. There are plenty of people who are aware that the missing girl and the truck are related, but there is nothing in print. It’s not something you would notice if you weren’t actively looking for it, but-“

“So the paper made a mistake.” Will said. “So what?”

“There was no mistake.” Jason said. “They’re trying to manipulate information. They’re trying to shape the story before it becomes a story. They don’t want this girl talking. And if she does, they want everyone around her to believe she is insane. And if you come up to explain what happened…. Well…”

“This is ridiculous.” Will said, losing his patience. “Look, there’s no conspiracy. To suggest that we’re in the middle of some big cover up is just-“

“It’s not foolish.” Jason said, his voice firm. “Media controls the way we look at the world every day. Do you really think that the University doesn’t have an interest in portraying the school in the

best way possible? How would it look to the public, if a sex trafficking scandal blew up here?"

"The school wouldn't cover up a crime!" Will found his voice raising to almost a shout. "They wouldn't-"

Reiko gave a startled look to the door. Alice let out a panicked squeak and then back into her room. Will's mounting screams faded into an embarrassed silence.

"We're not sure if we can keep her here." Jason said. "But we're not sure where she can go. If the University is involved, and I'm sure they are-"

"You have no evidence of that." Will hissed.

"Will." Reiko said. "Please calm down."

Will took in a deep breath, closing his eyes.

"It's just a theory." He repeated, not opening his eyes. "Right?"

"…Just a theory." Jason repeated, although his tone indicated that he was sticking by it. "As I said we have no real evidence of wrongdoing. However-"

"I know." Will said, his voice heavy, as he opened his eyes. He shouldn't have gotten so angry at Jason over something so trivial. He and his wife had been nothing but helpful so far. Indeed they seemed to be the only allies he had. A difference in opinion… that's all it was. They would move past it. And perhaps there was something to be learned from their stance. He trusted them, trusted them completely, but he could not bring himself to imagine that there was some giant malicious organization out there covering up crimes and exploiting the innocent. Especially not here of all places.

"I want…" Will murmured. "To investigate that building."

Jason stopped talking, his lips pursed. Reiko folded her hands in her lap and stared at him.

"If we can get a lead." He said. "Any lead. Any idea of who those people were or where they were going… where they had been. That would make a world of difference."

Reiko nodded. “I think so too.” She said. “I’ve been asking around, like I said. But I didn’t see that truck. I didn’t see those men. I have no idea what I was looking for. You, on the other hand…”

She stood up. She was so small that it didn’t make her any taller than Jason, who was still sitting. “I can arrange for a tour of that building.” She said. “I know people… I can give you a certain amount of free reign to run around and take a look. I can introduce you to some people… and maybe we’ll come up with a breakthrough.”

She smiled at him radiantly. Will felt a strong burst of affection for her, and Jason as well. They didn’t have to do this for him, or for Alice. But here there were anyway.

“The Building in question.” Reiko said. “Was the Asian Cultural Center building. It’s meant to a sort of hub for general Asian related studies and fields. You’re Chinese, so you’ll have no trouble fitting in. I’m there all the time, I know lots of the staff and students.”

Will was completely aware that Reiko spoke several Asian languages. She had often embarrassed him by speaking to him in Mandarin. Despite being Chinese he had never bothered to learn it. If anyone could help him navigate the intricacies of the Center, it would be her.

“Yeah that sounds great.” He said enthusiastically. “When are we going?”

“Not tonight.” Reiko told him. “Tomorrow, at the earliest.”

“Tomorrow it is!” Will crowed, smiling widely at her. She smiled back, seemingly pleased with his enthusiasm.

“I’ll be holding down the fort.” Jason said. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave the lady alone. You sure you’re going to be okay?”

He was speaking more to Reiko than Will.

“Oh, I’ll be fine.” She said. “I’ll be with Will; he’ll look after me.”

“You don’t have to worry Jason.” Will promised him. “I’ll take good care of her..”

Jason nodded. “Come get me if you need me, alright?” He said. “I don’t think you will- I hope you don’t, actually. But don’t hesitate.”

Reiko was already on her phone, making notes. “Oooooh, this is so exciting.” She gushed. “Here, Will… We’ll go after your classes are over, okay? That way we can take as much time as you need. What times are good for you?”

They exchanged information and bid their goodbyes. Jason’s mind was whirling as he stepped through the door and down the steps down to the sidewalk. Thoughts of kidnappings, sex rings, conspiracies, and the next day’s events were whirling around in his mind. He could think of nothing else as he stepped through the dark streets. It seemed so quiet and peaceful. It was almost impossible to think that a kidnapping had occurred her.

But it was like Reiko said, wasn’t it? This kind of thing happened everywhere. He had heard of it happening before. Why was the thought of it now so off putting? Was it because it had happened right in front of him? Was it because he had stopped it? Or maybe because he did not know what to make of this situation? Or perhaps it was because he was so intricately involved that he was taking it upon himself, and his friends to conduct their own investigation.

He barely registered Wolf’s chattering on Xbox Live as he stepped into the House. (“My Fucking Roommate makes it impossible to bring girls over, man… If I had enough money to live alone I would be drowning in pussy!”) He didn’t feel very hungry, and simply poured himself a glass of water.

He stepped into his room and closed the door behind him. (“Fuck Man these bitches man. I just want to-) the noise lowered to a buzz as the door shut behind him. His thoughts were still on Alice and his plans with Reiko.

The Asian Cultural Center… he had never been there. He had always disliked that sort of thing, preferring to identify himself as simply being American. He and Reiko were rather different in that respect. She knew so much about Asia, its culture, its history, its languages, its people. He didn’t know jack shit, and didn’t really care to. He

imagined that he would stick out like a sore thumb there. There would be lots of international students. But this was an American college town. It wouldn't be THAT unusual to see someone like him there… right?

It dawned on him then that he hadn't studied. He checked the clock on his bedside table and blanched at how late it was. No… not tonight. He would have to put it off until tomorrow. He was way ahead; he would be fine. He would have to commit to studying tomorrow though. For now he needed to relax.

He managed to have a much better sleep than he had in the past couple of days. He woke up at his standard, regular time. His mind was clear. Although Alice was still a concern in the back of his mind, he knew that he couldn't let this control his life. He had to focus on school.

Wolf was still lying on the couch, playing games. He had not moved from his spot from last night. He looked bleary and exhausted. Will could tell at a glance that he had not gone to sleep.

He washed up, got ready, and made breakfast before setting out. He was so anxious to get to class early today that he took a piece of toast with him for the road. He munched on it absentmindedly as he walked. He found himself waiting for the bus this time. A small black haired girl looked his way as he approached and gave him a smile. He ignored her as he lowered the bag on his shoulder to his side, and rummaged through it to double check that everything was still there. Satisfied he closed the bag back up and leaned against the side of the bus stop.

He reached for his phone and pulled it out. Reiko had messaged him.

Let's meet up somewhere before we go. Coffee?

Sure. He typed back, and put it back into his pocket. He was excited. It was that tense, nervous excitement that he always got whenever he was going to do something great. Whatever happened today, he knew it would be a day to remember.

He boarded the bus with the girl and the others waiting with them and took a seat. He took his usual seat near the back and flipped open his bag. He pulled out a book, cracked it open and began to read. He often read during transit. He decided it was time to get back into studying, so today he had a large, thick textbook propped up against his knee. He spent the trip reading, marking out interesting facts with his marker.

The bus came to a stop again. The door slid open and more passengers got into. Loud, angry voices began to hit his ears.

"I told you that there's something up!"

Will found himself looking up. The black haired girl who had been looking his way darted her head back to the front. A group of people were bustling onboard, but one rather stood out. An angry looking girl with bright orange hair was arguing vehemently with a large, overweight guy. Well, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she was venting. The boy didn't seem interested in continuing the argument. He stayed completely silent as they stepped past Will and sat down on the empty seats behind them.

"I tried telling them." The girl was saying, as she pulled out a notepad and began ruffling through the papers. "This girl, this girl that's missing, she doesn't exist. I've checked, I've double checked, I've asked everyone trying to follow up on the story, but no one knows anything."

Will stiffened. It was all he could do to stop himself from turning around and speaking to the girl.

"We know that she suffers from some kind of behavioral disorder." The girl was saying. "But there's no record of anyone like that in the hospital. I went there and asked: No one had any idea what I was talking about. And the editors… they're trying to tell me to drop it until we know more."

Will was sure of it. This girl was talking about Alice. He fumbled with his phone, trying to turn on the recording software as the girl kept talking. He pressed the button.

"-It's all so weird." The girl said. Will cast a look back at her as she flipped a long, well-manicured hand through her dyed hair. She wasn't exactly bad looking, but something about the bright colored hair, glasses, and layers of makeup put him off. "A missing girl should be much bigger news than this. And one with a disability, too…"

The boy said something that Will couldn't quite make out, but the girl quickly cut him off.

"I want to find someone who knows who this girl is." She said. "This is what journalism is all about, asking questions even when people tell you can't…"

Will felt himself rise his head. He closed the book with a snap and got to his feet. The black haired girl gave him a surprised look as he grabbed hold of the bar above her head and leaned past her, towards the orange hair girl.

"Excuse me."

The girl gave a small start. She stared up at him open mouthed. Her surprise gave away to misgiving.

"Yes?" She asked curtly, in a no nonsense sort of way. Will had the distinct impression that she thought that he was trying to make a move on her. By the look of the boy sitting next to her, he thought the same thing. His rather placid expression suddenly looked dangerous.

"I'm sorry but I couldn't help but overhear." He said. "Were you just talking about that missing girl? The one in the paper?"

The girl's cold exterior vanished in an instant. Her eyes shone with enthusiasm. "I wrote the article!" She chirped. "Err, the one in the student paper. You read it, then?"

Will could not recall whether or not it had been the student paper. However he gave her a nod.

The girl clapped her hands together in glee. "I… wow!" She said. "I don't know what to say!" She beamed at him brilliantly. The boy

sitting next to her was scowling at him now. “Ummm… I’d ask you to sit down and talk about it, but…”

“It’s fine.” Will told her shortly, wanting to change the topic. “Listen, there’s a reason I read that article. I think I may know where that girl is.”

The girl gave a start. She was staring up at him in shock, her mouth wide open. It took her a moment to recover herself. She clutched the notebook in her hand and, with a quick press of the pen, was already jotting down notes.

“Here, of all places…” She muttered furiously. “Listen, can you tell me-“

The bus came to a stop. The doors began to open, and more people were beginning to climb on board.

“My stop is coming up.” Will said. “I can’t give an interview here. Can we meet up later?”

“Oh…” The girl hesitated, again seemingly suspicious. But after a brief moment of consideration she smiled. “Of course!” She said. “Stephen, come with us. I’ll probably need you to conduct notes while I do the interview.”

Will had no objections to this. “That sounds great.” He said. “Here’s my number…” He reached forward and yanked the pen out of her hand and scribbled his digits onto the pad upside down. She froze for a moment, her fingers twitching, as Will handed it back to her. “Thanks!” He called out to her as he quickly moved back to his seat to gather his things. “See you later!”

He leapt off the bus in a hurry. The driver scowled at him as the door slammed shut behind him. Will turned his head and watched as the bus rolled out past him. He was standing in front of the building where he would be taking his first class of the day.

He could hardly believe his luck. There were other people noticing things and asking questions. For all they knew there was already an official investigation behind the scenes. The girl, Lysa, would surely provide some sort of insight into how the paper handled the story.

Will felt an immense pride in himself as he climbed the steps of the building and stepped inside. People were milling about as usual, going in every which direction, chatting amongst themselves. Will shouldered his bag and stepped up the next set of stairs to reach the elevator.

He was a little bit early today. There were a couple of early birds already sitting in their places, reading and writing. Will sat down at his desk and propped open his book and got back into reading where he had left off on the bus.

People began to filter in not long after that, conversing amongst themselves. The buzzing around him became louder and louder to the point where he could not focus. Apparently the students were eager to get the conversation out of their system before class began proper.

It was just too much to bear. Will closed the book with a snap and looked up, taking in the conversation around him. The class fell into a hush as the professor walked into the room.

"The University has seen fit." She said, her voice stiff. "To remind you that any unusual activity on Campus should be reported post haste. Now-"

And then she launched into her lecture. Will watched her, almost absentmindedly, as she launched into a convoluted explanation as to how religion had contributed to all of the wars in human history.

When class dismissed Will found himself starting to think that maybe this woman had a bit of a wrong idea on how and why wars were conducted. He was beginning to mull over whether that would be a good subject for his final paper (Why my Professor is a dipshit: A study) as he gathered his things and stepped out into the hallway. He had taken so long to pick up his books that he was one of the last to leave the room.

When he stepped into the elevator today, it was almost empty. The only two people in here were girls, speaking to each other in hushed tones.

“Scary…”

“I know, right?”

They looked up at him and gave a small start. Will ignored them as he stepped inside and pressed the button for the ground floor.

The girls must have been talking about something personal, because they did not speak another word as the elevator slowly began to descend to the ground floor. The elevator was in complete silence as it descended to their destination. Will stepped out into the hall and down the steps, and the girls immediately began whispering amongst themselves again.

He stepped through the glass doors back onto the street. He was already thinking of texting Reiko again, perhaps to bring up his potential new lead, but decided against it. It wasn’t anything concrete after all. Maybe Lysa wouldn’t have any information that would be of use to them. It would only discourage Jason and Reiko if he started hyping up every little idea he had to them. No, they had held back on telling him everything they had talked about, and considered. Perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea for him to do the same.

He had another class before his meeting with Reiko. He spent the break as he always did, by studying and working over lunch. His mind was beginning to clear, he realized absentmindedly, as he turned the page to his textbook, pen in hand. He was getting better at controlling his wayward thoughts towards Alice and her situation. It was time to focus on his schoolwork.

A couple of hours later he was leaving the café, bag slung over his shoulder, as he stepped out into the street. A couple of giggling girls stepped past him as he walked along the sidewalk and to his next building.

He stepped up to the building and opened the door. He took a step inside and was about to head for his class when a voice hit his ears.

“Scary…”

He turned his head to find a couple of people surrounding a bulletin board.

“Here, of all places?”

“No one is safe…”

Will came up behind them to have a better look at what they were staring at. It seemed to be a rather large bulletin. He stared at it; his eyes narrowed.

Please Be Wary of Street Crime!

In smaller words under it was a description of a brutal street fight that had left two men critically injured and their property stolen. Will stared at it for a bit longer than he probably should have.

“Um, can I help you?”

They were staring at him. Will snapped out of the trance with a shake of his head.

“No, I was just…” He paused. “Looking at the bulletin.”

He pulled out his phone and raised it. The people moved out of the way as he snapped a photo of the poster. Will looked it over, checking to make sure that it was a good image before pocketing it.

“Thanks.” He told them, before moving away. Frantic whispers followed him as he stepped up to the classroom.

He arrived right on time and took his seat.

“The school has saw fit to ask me to remind you.” The professor said. “That there has been a recent rash of crime in the area. A particularly brutal beating and robbery, I am told… if anyone has any information, please go speak to the campus police. They will be more than happy to help you.”

Reiko wasn’t lying. Will thought blankly as they went over formulas and equations. The school had been taking action against what he had done. The thought made him sick. Were they actively looking for him right now? Did they have an idea of who he was?

No, they would have found him by now. It wasn't like he was getting into trouble or actually beating people up to steal their things. No, the faculty thought that the students needed to be warned.

He paused; his pen hand frozen over a half written word. Now that he thought about it… perhaps Alice wasn't the only girl at risk in the area. Perhaps there were others, all around them, who were being used and abused by these people. The public didn't need to be warned about him… but THEM...

He would have a lot to speak to Reiko about it when he saw her, he decided, as his hand got back into drifting across the page. She would have a better grasp of what was going on than he did. She was so attuned to the going ons at the University…

When class was dismissed for that day Will found himself messaging Reiko before even leaving the room. Her response was quick and prompt: Clearly she had been expecting it. She sent him nothing more than a coffee emoji and a location.

He met her halfway there. She looked up, surprised, as he came running up to her.

"That excited to see me?" She teased, as he came to a stop. "I'm flattered."

"Ha ha." Will said sardonically. "You wish. I just have a lot to talk with you about."

She tilted her head to the coffee shop. "I know." She said. "Let's sit down for a couple of minutes."

They went inside and waited in line. Reiko fumbled with her bag for her wallet as Will stared straight ahead.

"Lots of people are talking." He said. "It's becoming hot news, I think."

"Yes, I'm aware." Reiko said. "There are all sorts of rumors and stories going around…"

"Heard anything new?"

"Nothing I haven't heard before." She sniffed.

“Both of my professors warned us to watch out for crimes in the area.”

“Yes, I heard they had been asked to do that.” Reiko said. “The administration is very concerned… you really… uh, whoever committed such a terrible crime really did a number on those people.” Will’s eye twitched. He didn’t think anyone had heard her, but he still felt uneasy hearing her say that out loud.

“How did they present the story to the school?”

“About how you would expect, I think.” Reiko said. “They went to the police, said they were attacked and robbed, and that was that. The University is probably trying to protect its reputation. It doesn’t want to be seen as violent or unsafe.”

Will scoffed. “You think that’s all there is to it?”

“Well, no.” Reiko admitted. “It’s certainly part of it… but there are so many reasons and justifications for it all. I don’t know what to make of it, to be honest with you.” She folded her hands and sighed.

“I spoke with a reporter from the school paper today.” Will said. “She wanted to cover the story, and we spoke about it.”

Reiko gave a small start. “How much did you tell her?” She asked, sounding a little appalled.

“Nothing really.” Will said. Reiko was already shaking her head.

“No, no, no.” She said. “Will, they’re looking for you. Going out and speaking to someone, openly getting yourself involved… what are you thinking?” She looked really anxious.

“I don’t think she meant any harm.” Will said, frowning. “She was excited to talk to me.”

“Of course she was.” Reiko said, exasperatedly. “She may have realized-“

She stopped as they came up to the counter. They hurriedly ordered and handed over their money, continuing their conversation in hushed tones.

“She may have realized that you may have had something to do with it!”

“Like I said, I didn’t say anything to her.” Will said. “I just said that I may have a lead for her, and we made plans to meet up later.”

Reiko sighed.

“Will…” She said. “Do you know why we didn’t want you to be going around, asking questions?”

“No.”

“It’s because you have no idea what you’re doing.” She said flatly. “We’re dealing with someone- perhaps an entire group of someones- who have considerable amount of power and influence at the University. Powerful enough to slant an investigation and the media coverage of what happened. Going around asking questions, giving interviews… someone’s going to notice. And it could end very badly for you.”

There was that strange, conspiratorial side of Reiko again. Will honestly had no idea where it had come from. He was quite a bit younger than Jason and Reiko. He had met them when he was so young that he had not really considered their political views before deciding that he thought of them as two of his closest friends. He wondered where this strange distrust of authority came from. Jason, who he knew came from a somewhat rough background might have picked up some strange ideas, but he knew Reiko to be intelligent, well-educated young lady. Perhaps her husband had been a bad influence on her, he thought wryly. He had felt as if Jason had been taking the lead when arguing about the conspiracy.

“We’re not going to know for sure.” He said, his voice firm. “If we don’t ask questions. We can’t scurry around not knowing what’s up.”

Reiko stared at him, as if considering his words, before giving a small nod.

“You’re right of course.” She said quietly, as she took the cup of coffee in her hands and cradled it gently. “I just… I’m worried about you, Will. Jason and I can handle ourselves, but you-“

“I’ll be fine.” Will said shortly. “You’re treating me like a kid.”

She giggled. “We’ve been over this already.” Her expression grew a lot more serious. “Will, this isn’t a game.” She said. “You- or any of us, really- could end up in a really bad place if we keep going down this path. I implore you, if you’re not absolutely sure you want to be involved-“

“We went over this yesterday.” Will said. “I want to help.”

Reiko sighed, giving her head a small shake, before giving him a small smile. “You’re a lot like Jason.” She said. “I can’t even begin to tell you how hard I’ve fought to keep him out of trouble, to keep him off the streets and getting involved with things like this.” She looked away from him and down into her coffee. She sighed. “And now I’m jumping in head first.”

She looked distant and forlorn, as if she were reliving old, almost forgotten memories. “But then maybe that’s for the best. Maybe it’s that sort of attitude we need right now.” She looked back at him. “Ready to go?”

He nodded; his hand wrapped around his untouched drink. “Always.”

They stepped out of the coffee shop and back out into the street. Reiko still had that distant, forlorn look on her face, but it began to fade as they stepped down the sidewalk and to their destination.

“I can’t believe you’ve never been to the Cultural Center.” Reiko told him, her voice suddenly becoming stern. “What exactly are you going to school for?” Will almost groaned. This was the side of her Will didn’t like. He liked to think of this as the ‘Hermione Granger’ side of her personality.

“Not my heritage.” Will said. “I want a job, thanks.”

“Education is about more than getting a job.” Reiko said. “Four thousand years of Chinese history and you’re ignorant of almost all of it-“

“My parents say the same thing.”

Will often brought up his parents during these conversations, as he knew it immediately made the conversation awkward. Reiko was well aware that Will's parents severely disliked her and didn't approve of how much time Will was spending around her, or her husband. She raised her hand to her mouth and pretended to cough.

"Yes, well." She said. "They're right, you know."

"I'm American." Will said, trying to end the argument as simply as possible.

"Alright then." Reiko said sharply. "Which President-" Will thought it was high time to change the subject.

"Do you want to take a look around the garage first, before we go inside?" Reiko bit her lip and fell silent: This time she had taken the bait.

"I don't think so…" She said. "No, not yet. Let's ask around first, before we do anything else. And try to get inside that garage… Stay close to me, alright?"

The crowd of students began to shift from the casually dressed simply enjoying their afternoon to primly dressed, serious looking people strutting around with their noses head high. Reiko looked completely in her element, but Will was completely lost. He did not make a habit of visiting University exhibits and museums. He kept giving awkward looks to Reiko as she strode up to the front of the building.

"Can we just walk inside?" Will asked blankly. Reiko shot him a look.

"Of course." She said promptly. She opened the door for him and stepped inside. He followed in after her. They found themselves standing in a wide open spacious room. A large staircase to the side turned and twisted up to a second story. It looked grand, somehow. Will looked to his side and noticed a small glass door that led to an exhibit. He could make out the shapes of paintings through the dark glass. Vaguely oriental looking faces stared out at him through the glass, and Reiko had to pull touch his arm to get his attention.

“I thought you weren’t interested.” She teased. “We can look and investigate, okay?”

“Yeah, sure….” He looked back at the glass and turned back away; his gaze focused on the front desk. His eyes flickered past the young woman sitting at the desk, to the people milling around the entrance hall, chatting idly amongst themselves or checking their phones.

“They’re probably preparing a tour of the exhibits.” Reiko noted. “It wouldn’t hurt to tag along.”

“Ah, Reiko!”

Reiko jumped. She almost instinctively latched onto Will’s arm as a tall, lanky man approached them. Dressed in an immaculate brown checkered suit and tie that was probably far suited for a much older man, and gigantic hipster glasses that seemed much too big for his eyes, he gave Will the impression of a naturally awkward man trying his best to come off as impressive.

“Oh, Mr. Miller…” She said, trying her best to sound friendly. Will knew her well enough that she was only pretending to be on friendly terms with him. She was still clutching his arm tightly- she did not want to be left alone. Will, almost instinctively, stepped forward and stared at the man with an icy stare. Reiko gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

“Ah, and this must be… Jason?” The man inquired, as he held out a hand to him. “Reiko has told me all about you-“

Reiko’s hand suddenly released Will’s arm. “Oh no.” She said quickly. “This isn’t my husband… this is a family friend. Will, this is Diamond Miller. He’s the Director of this facility.”

Diamond lowered his hand and gave them both a considering look. Reiko looked almost embarrassed. Will shrewdly suspected that she was worried about what people would think about them being seen together. He wasn’t, as she had told him earlier, a little kid anymore. This man had mistaken him for her husband.

Will thought it best to break the ice. “Diamond?” He repeated. “What kind of name is that?”

Reiko snapped out of her reverie to give him a horrified look. Mark Diamond did not laugh. He simply gave Will a considering look.

"The one that my Mother gave me." He said simply. "Now… Reiko. What brings you and your…. Ah, family friend here?"

Reiko closed her lips and turned her attention back to Miller.

"Will." She said, a trace of irritation in her voice. "Thought it would be interesting to go through the exhibits. I suggested we go together."

"So it was your idea?" Diamond inquired; his eyebrow raised. "Does your husband know?"

"He thought it was a great idea." Will interjected, interrupting them. He had not had a good first impression of Diamond Miller from the moment he saw him, but hearing him speak was only cementing that impression. His voice was high pitched, and had a certain quality to it that made everything sound like a whine. And on top of that, he didn't like the way he was looking at Reiko.

"I see." Miller said, his eyes flickering to Will. "Well, if that's so…" He coughed, placing a hand over his mouth before lowering it again. "It is not my business to pry, of course."

"No." Reiko said. "It isn't."

"Well you certainly have chosen an excellent time to visit the Cultural Center." Diamond said, waving his hand. "We have a number of excellent pieces on display from all over Japan. A variety of artwork, murals, swords-"

Will's eyes lit up. "Swords?" He repeated eagerly, his dislike vanishing in an instant. "Can we go look, Reiko?"

Reiko gave him an exasperated look, and then a smile. "Of course." She said. "That's why we're here." She looked down at her bag, and then back up again. "We'll be seeing you, Miller…"

"Very well." Miller said, his eyes falling on her. "I suspect we will see each other again, Reiko. It was a pleasure meeting you." He added,

turning to Will. He turned and was gone in an instant. Reiko watched him go before letting out an audible sigh.

"What a creep." She complained under her breath as she shook her head. She combed through her long beautiful black hair with her fingers as she stared at the front door. "Sorry about that Will."

"It's fine." He said. "Who was that guy?"

"Like I said, director of the facility." She said. "Despite not being Asian." She added with a scowl.

"Is that weird?" Will asked blankly.

"Very." Reiko told him flatly. "Especially since he has a reputation… they say he majored in Japanese to try and travel to Japan to meet women."

"What's wrong with that?"

Reiko gave him a look.

"I think being around Wolfe has desensitized me to this kind of thing." Will offered. "He's not worse than Wolfe."

Reiko opened her mouth and then shut it again.

"You're not wrong." She said. "But I can't believe I'm agreeing with you. He's always trying to take me to dinner even though he knows I'm married. I bet he thought he could intimidate you."

"I'd like to see that guy try and intimidate Jason." Will chuckled. Jason, as tough as he was, could probably break the guy in two with a blink of his eyelid.

"Ugh, stop. I try not to think about how much I want that to happen." Reiko said, sighing, still looking rather ruffled, as she looked around the room. "Well, they know me here. So as long as you stick next to me you shouldn't have any issues. Don't touch anything, and don't run off."

"Sure Mom." Will said disparagingly. Reiko opened her mouth as if about to say something, before shutting it again. She turned to the large staircase and pointed upward. "I think we'll start on the second

floor first.” She said quietly. “When we come back down we’ll take another set of stairs that should take us right next to the garage.”

Will nodded as they set off. He leapt up the stairs nimbly, one foot after the other, as Reiko trailed after him.

“This is a museum.” She huffed irritably as he came to a stop at the top of this flight of stairs. Another flight went up to the next floor. He grinned at her, tilting his head to the side.

“I pity the woman who marries you.” Reiko sniffed audibly as she reached his side. “Ummmm… Best go up these too.”

They went up the next set of stairs and came to a small hallway that stretched out in different directions. Reiko waved her hand carelessly in front of them.

“We’re separating things by region.” She said. “The 1st floor is dedicated to Japanese stuff, and this floor…” She smirked at him. “What do you think it is?”

“Vietnamese?”

She sighed. “Chinese.” She said.

They stepped into a large, open room. They stopped in the doorway to stare around at the exhibit that had been set up there. A large podium had been erected in the center of the room, where elaborate statues of important figures in Chinese history stood staring dead ahead at the crowd milling around them.

“Ooooh.” Reiko said enthusiastically, as she caught sight of this. “These are-“

“Old.” Will finished, grinning at her.

“I think these are replicas actually.” She said over her shoulder as she made her way over to them. “Authentic artifacts are so fragile…”

“I’d rather see the real thing.” Will told her, as he stepped up next to her and stared at the statue. “I mean, I didn’t come here to look at a replica.”

“Hmmm.” She said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “Well, they can’t entrust such a valuable part of their history to just anyone. Once it’s gone it won’t come back. But I see what you mean… replicas lack that feeling of authenticity.”

They continued their discussions in earnest, Reiko rapidly explaining to him the history of what felt like every dynasty in China- the Han, the Three Kingdoms, the Song, the Ming…

“Let’s just focus on these paintings for now.” Will said hastily, as he turned to an elaborate illustration that depicted a beautiful forest surrounded by mountains that were enshrouded in mist.

“Sure.” She said, taking a glance at it, before launching into another convoluted explanation about its history, the time period it came from, the imperial dynasty it was crafted under, the name and background of the artist…”

Will found himself desperately looking around for the next thing to grab his attention. Most of the people around them were shooting him dirty looks. He must have looked out of place here, with his street clothes and attitude. He turned back to Reiko, who was in the middle of explaining where the picture had been drawn (She had already gone into far more depth than the little plague on the bottom of the picture could ever hope to)

“Don’t forget why we’re here.”

She closed her mouth with a snap, her eyes flitting around the room. “Careful.” She muttered, under her breath. “We don’t know who these people are.”

He nodded to her, and then pointed to another painting. “This one is my favorite.”

Her eyes lit up again. “Oooh, good taste.” She said. “You know, Will, maybe you could be an art critic! Or work in a Museum…”

Will’s shoulder accidently met with another person’s.

“Sorry. Will and the other man said to each other, without even thinking about it, before turning again. But they both stopped mid

step and turned back around. They stared at each other, each of them horrified.

"You!" Will blurted as, he looked into the eyes of the man he had beat up just a couple of days before. His entire face was covered with bandages. His face was so bruised and banged up that Will would not have recognized him if he had not reacted to his presence.

Will did not even stop to think. His hand clenched into a fist. The man stared down at it, his mouth fell in horror, and then turned and bolted back into the hallway.

"No wait!" Will called. "Someone stop him!"

People stopped and stared as the man rushed by them, clumsily knocking aside one of the exhibit statues, which fell to the ground and shattered into pieces. Someone let out a surprised yell.

"Will!" Reiko said, shocked, grabbing his arm. "What-"

"That was him!" Will shouted, and without another word burst into a sprint. Reiko let out a surprised squeak as she hurriedly let go of his arm: People were chattering now, asking him to calm down, but Will saw nothing but the back of the man who was running away from him. He darted after him, the crowd hurriedly parting to give him space as he tore down the hallway after him.

"No stop stay away from me!"

Will was taller than average, and in excellent physical condition. The other man, although not exactly short, and not exactly out of shape, was in nowhere near the same level. Although Will was not a runner, he was making great gains on him. The man cast a glance behind him, and then ripped a painting off of the wall and threw it at him.

Will, shocked, brought up his hands to swat it aside, but had to slow down to do so. The giant frame, which he thought to weight at least several pounds, hit his arms and slammed onto the wall, and barely registered the fact that it broke into several pieces.

The man had come to the stairs. In his hurry he had taken the first four steps and then leapt the railing to more quickly reach the bottom. Will, without even considering the movement, quickly did the same.

Will did not take the landing as well as his quarry: Although Will could easily jump and typically stick landings, he had no experience at all with landing on uneven ground… such as stairs. A fact that he realized very quickly was a bit of a problem the moment his feet touched the metal.

His right foot fell on top of a higher stair. His weight crumbled on the one leg and he felt himself falling forward. He desperately reached his hand out and clutched the rail, barely able to push himself back, as he found his balance as his other foot connected with the stair.

The other man had hit the ground running and had already turned to run down the hallway. Will grimaced as he tried to fight off the pain and hobble after him. His leg was stinging badly, but he did not seem to be dislocated or broken. By the time he staggered down the stairs he felt he could run on it again, although now a deep, nagging pain followed with each movement.

He whirled around to see the man disappear into a small, out of the way door. Will winced as he took on after him, much more slowly than he had before. From above there were shouts and cries- he could hear people thundering down the stairs after them. He did not turn to look up at them: He continued ahead towards the ajar door that the man had stepped through.

It was another, smaller hallway. One that seemed made for staff of the building to move about without bothering museum goers. There was no one around. Will's eyes darted around frantically, trying to discern just where the man had gotten off to, before deciding he would have to wing it.

All the doors were closed: He had not heard any of them slam shut. He had likely run forward. Will moved forward in a sort of odd gait: his leg still stinging from his fall. He passed a door and barely had

time to worry whether or not he had made a wrong turn before he heard a voice, audible even from this distance down the hallway.

“He’s back!”

Will felt a strong burst of energy well up within him. He knew where they were. He found the next door and ripped it open. A small set of stairs, only a couple of steps long, lowered to a small garage. The same truck that he had seen Alice leap out of days prior.

And two of the three men who he had attacked that day were standing right there, standing frozen by the truck, staring up at him with horror. Will stared down at them, trying not to let the let the pain he was feeling from his injured leg to show up on his face.

“Hello boys.” He said, as he slowly stepped down the stairs. “You’re still around, huh?” His eyes flickered to the truck; his eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me there’s another girl in there.”

The man he had chased gulped, but his companion was already reaching into his pocket. Will found himself seizing up as the man drew a gun and pointed it directly at him.

“Don’t move!”

Will froze completely. His mind a complete blank. He had no idea what to do next. He felt himself at a loss.

“Put your hands up!” The man commanded, gesturing with the weapon, still pointing it firmly at Will. Behind him the other man was backing away- sliding alongside the side of the truck, he turned and climbed into the driver’s side, shutting the door behind him. Will had no choice: He raised his hands and put them on his head. His sudden fervor that had built up within him had given way to fear. He had not expected the men to be armed.

“Now turn around.” The man instructed. “And get down on the ground.”

Will did not fancy turning his back to a man with a gun, but he knew that he had no choice. He did as he was told. He turned around and stared straight ahead. He bent over and bowed down to the door.

“Now.” The man said, his voice cold. “Who are you?”

Will bit down the fear that was welling up inside him try and scrape together an answer. He recalled how worried Jason and Reiko had been about these people discovering these identities. He could not be honest with them.

“Jet Wolf.”

The man snorted. “Jet Wolf?” he repeated, incredulous. “What kind of name is that?”

Will had no idea: He had just come up with it out of nowhere. He had taken the name, Jet, from a famous cartoon he had seen as a kid. And Wolf, he had taken from…

“Look man.” Will said, his voice shaking. “I just wanted a girlfriend, man. That’s all I wanted. Please let me go, I promise that I won’t ever bother you again.”

He could feel the gun on his back. His pathetic act had done nothing to put them off. If anything Will had the impression that the man with the gun was relishing his power over him.

And then footsteps began to thunder outside the door.

Will felt himself freeze, looking up at the door hopefully, before turning around at the man. He suddenly looked downright terrified, as he stuffed the gun back in his jacket.

“We need to GO!”

The garage door slowly began to open as Will whirled back to his feet. The man leapt up onto the back of the truck and clung on to the side as the engine whirred to life. The footsteps were getting louder.

“Stop!” Will cried, as the man turned to face the truck, pressing his face against the side of the vehicle, covering from view. The footsteps came to a stop just behind him in the door as the garage door fully opened.

The truck took off into the street so quickly that the roof of the truck scraped the garage door. It turned out into the concrete and out of

sight.

“Wait!” Will was already taking several steps forward before strong hands clamped down on his shoulders. He whirled around to see a uniformed man standing just behind him.

“Officer!” He blurted, surprised. He turned back to the door and raised his hand, pointing. “Those men… they’re getting away!”

He barely registered what happened next. A pair of handcuffs clapped onto his other hand. He turned his head down to stare at them, his mouth open.

“Come on.” The other man said, tugging on the handcuff. “You’re coming with me.”

Will felt himself go into shock as he was led away back into the building. They passed by a group of other people standing just outside the room, watching the situation apprehensively.

“Officer-“

“Thank you for your patience.” The man said shortly. “I have this situation well under control.”

Will found his voice.

“Wait a minute.” He said, his voice finding its way to his throat. “What is this about? What did I do?”

The man looked at him. “Created a ruckus, destroyed property, tried to attack another patron…?”

“He started it.” Will insisted, looking around at the group. “Did you not see how he threw over that statue? I was just trying to stop him!”

The crowd did look somewhat uncomfortable and uneasy. But no one spoke up.

“We will speak of this further at the station.” The Officer said, as he tugged Will’s arm. Will numbly followed after him back to where he had come from.

“Will!”

More people were waiting out here, among them Reiko. She stood there open mouthed as they passed by. “Excuse us!” The Officer called, gesturing with his free hand. “Let us by!”

“Wait a minute.” Reiko said, stepping forward. “What’s going on here?” She looked at Will. “What happened?”

“Please step back.” The Officer said.

“Do as he says.” Will told her. “We’ll get this resolved, alright?”

Reiko looked concerned. “Will…”

“I’ll call you.” Will promised. “Okay?”

Reiko did not look happy, but nodded and stepped aside. Will was feeling a bit more confident at this point as he was led forward ,through the halls, out the door, and to the car.

He was pushed into the back seat and sat stiffly as the car door was shut and locked behind him. There was already a driver in the car, who was soon joined by the man who had apprehended Will.

Apprehended… it made him feel like a criminal. He clutched his fists in the backseat of the car and tried to relax. At the end of the day he did not do anything wrong. Once everything was cleared up and resolved he would be going home and planning his next move.

Will tried to relax in the back seat of the police car, keeping his demeanor calm and relaxed. The men up front did not speak to him, or each other. They simply started straight ahead at the road. Will could not bring himself to ask them any questions. He recalled a conversation he had had with Jason a long time ago.

He had not been training for very long. He was just getting the hang of the positions his hands should be in and how he could use them, and he had spent the entire day trying to punch out Jason, who was more than twice his size. Jason had simply swatted aside his attacks with no effort. Even at this age Will was determined to push himself to new heights, but was finding himself growing increasingly frustrated with their size difference.

“I’d never be able to stand up to you in a real fight.” He complained, wiping his forehead with his arm. Jason considered him, staring down at him imposingly from above. Will, at this stage of his life, saw him as being completely invincible.

“You’re still very young.” He said after a moment’s consideration. “You’ll grow into it. It takes a long time to get these movements down and your muscles to be able to react to them. You need to start young.”

“I’m not that young.” Will said, annoyed. “I’ll be fourteen in April.” Jason snorted.

“Yeah you still have a lot of growing up to do if you’re still bragging about your age.” He said. He raised his hand and pointed his palm at him. Will scowled at him and jabbed at it with his fist.

“Well what’s the point?” Will asked.

“The point of what?”

“Training if I can’t win!”

“You’re not training so you can win all of your fights.” Jason said patiently. “You’re training so that you can win some of them, later on down the line.”

“But what if I get beat up tomorrow?” Will asked. “What, am I just supposed to sit there and take it?”

“Yeah.” Jason said. “That’s life. You’re not always going to win. The best you can hope for is to not always lose.” He smiled. “And being prepared for anything is a big part of that.”

Will certainly wasn’t prepared for this. He didn’t want to be sitting in the back of the Police car, worrying about what was going to happen next. He wanted to be out. He wanted to be free. But he knew that he had to treat the Officers with the utmost dignity and respect. He would get out of this. He simply had to have faith.

He sat quietly and patiently in the back seat of the car watching the police officers in front of him. Neither turned to look at him, but he could see glances being thrown his way in the mirror up front. He

had not moved from he had been asked to sit, and he imagined that they were not used to dealing with such cooperative people. He sat stiffly in the seat and waited for the car to stop at its destination.

The car rolled along through town for about five or seven minutes before coming to a stop at the local police station. The man in the passenger's seat got out and walked over to Will's door and opened it.

"Thank you." Will said as he stepped out. He could not help but wince as the man took his wrist and replaced the handcuff. Will allowed him to do it, but he felt a twinge of concern in him. They really were treating him rather like a criminal.

He was pushed towards the building and off he went, with no resistance. He still felt that intense wave of nervousness.

They stepped inside and stopped in front of the front desk. The woman sitting there was looking at her papers and did not look up at them right away. When she finally did she gasped, and pens went clattering to the floor.

"Matt, who-"

She stared at them as they passed by her desk and went to the back. Past a couple of rooms, down some stairs, and through another door and they found themselves in a small jail cell.

The officer opened the door and gestured he get inside. Will hesitated, before stepping forward. The officer reached forward and removed the handcuff from his wrist. The door shut behind him.

"Excuse me." Will said, as the officer turned away. "What's going on?"

He turned back to look at him. "You're under arrest." The man said, as if it were obvious.

"For what?"

"For the assault of two delivery workers."

Will placed his hands against the bars. "Wait a minute." He said. "I-"

He stopped. He was about to explain everything. The reason he had attacked those men, the pursuits, Alice and her situation. But a tidbit of advice that Jason had given him once pushed its way to the forefront of his thoughts.

"Don't tell them anything."

Will pulled away from the bars and turned around, facing the insides of the cell and taking in the sight of his quarters. There was a small cot and a faucet for water. He supposed it wasn't too bad. He had seen pictures of prisons in third world countries. At least he had a cell to himself.

He had no idea what he was to do now. He was sure that he should consult a lawyer, but he was a college student. He couldn't pay for one. His parents wouldn't help. They had always told him would never support him if he got into trouble with the law. This made him very reluctant to even consider contacting them.

He stared around the room apprehensively before taking a seat on the cot. He sighed and closed his eyes, trying to picture the day's events in his head. What was going to happen now? He would need to be investigated, wouldn't he? He wasn't sure what the exact process would be (He was not studying law) but he was sure that he would need to speak to a lawyer before being interrogated.

He felt a brief sense of irritation with himself: Did he really not understand his own rights? How stupid was he? …. Could he ask the police, if they came back? Wasn't he supposed to get one phone call? Now that he was here, and sitting alone, he felt himself growing a little bit anxious. He wished he knew more, understood more. He wished that he had an inkling of what he should do next. But it was too late for that now.

He sat down on the bed and bent his head over, thinking deeply, his mind running through all the possibilities. Now that he was left alone he suddenly felt very insecure. He wished he had someone to talk to. Suddenly the idea of being in a crowded prison, or even a cell mate, sounded very appealing. At least he would be able to ask what to expect.

He leaned back on the cot and stared at the bars. He had never thought that he would ever see the inside of a cell in his life, let alone be locked inside one.

No, he mustn't think like that. Someone would come for him eventually. When that happened, he would be ready for it.

Will straightened his head and neck and crossed his legs in front of him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. Now was not the time to worry about personal concerns or the world around him, or the situation that he had somehow gotten himself into. He was still here. He was still alive. He would find a way through this situation.

He sat like that for maybe ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. His legs folded under him, his back straight, his breathing calm and collected. He began to appreciate the still and silence of the room. There were no other prisoners, there were no guards or loud noises or Wolf sweating angrily at his Xbox. There was only calm.

He sat like that, his mind a complete blank, until the sound of footsteps began to reverberate through the hall. He kept his eyes shut until he heard them come to a stop outside the cell.

He opened his eyes to see a male and female officer staring at him through the bars. He smiled at them warmly.

"Hello." He said. He felt them stare at him warily as he stretched, getting out all the kinks in his shoulders.

"Hello." The man returned, casting a reluctant look at his female companion. "I am Officer Ratcliffe. And this is Officer Stefani. We would like to ask you a few questions."

"Sure." Will said. "But I think you could have done that at the museum."

He was not quite sure why he had said that. It was a spur of the moment thing, one that he hadn't really been actively thinking about or considering. But looking at the Officers through the bars it suddenly became very clear to him that they had not wanted him to ask that question.

The man flinched. He gave an aside glance to the woman next to him, and Will quickly surmised that she was likely his superior. She was staring at him with a considerate look through her long black bangs, one of which partially covered her eye.

"We have questions for you." The woman repeated. "Ones that can only be answered away from prying ears."

Will turned his head away. His mind was whirling. Jason's advice ringing in his ears.

Don't tell the police anything.

"I didn't need to be put in a cell." Will said. "You didn't even give me a chance to say anything."

The woman reached to her side and raised a key. "You will get your chance." She said. She lowered her hand to the door and turned the key. The door slid open.

Will slowly uncurled his legs out from under him and stood up. It seemed that he had gotten his wish. He now had someone to talk to. He smiled at the officers as he stepped forward to the door.

"Thank you." He said. "I would like that." He was looking more at Stefani than Ratcliffe. She turned away from him, a long braided strand of hair flipping through the air. She was a cop, apparently, but she sure didn't look like it. Will found himself wondering whether that hair cut was up to code. Surely female officers weren't allowed to have long hair?

Ratcliffe gave him a look as he stepped out into the hallway and followed Stefani through the narrow hallways. They stepped up a staircase and past a couple of thick doors.

"Inside." Stefani said, gesturing to the interrogation room. Will stood there, hesitating a little at the door. Stefani turned around to glance at him and Ratcliffe pushed him forward.

He stumbled into the room and looked around at the little white table and desk as Stefani stepped in behind him, and Ratcliffe followed after her. The door closed behind them with a snap.

“Have a seat.” Stefani said, waving to the desk with a careless wave. Will glanced at her, not at all sure what to make of this. This time he had not been handcuffed, and these officers had treated him quite a bit more reasonably than the last. However they had still brought him here, of all places. They clearly were still expecting him to talk about something.

He did as Stefani asked and took a seat at the desk. Despite his concerns about the situation he found himself calm and in control of the situation. He looked patiently at Stefani as Ratcliffe walked across the room, standing behind her, his arms folded in front of him. He seemed to be trying to look intimidating, but Will didn’t find himself too impressed. He was a lot smaller than he was, and clearly did not have the same sort of fighting background.

“Well.” Officer Stefani said, as she stepped up to the white table. She placed her hand on the surface and stared intently at him. “You are Will Wei. Twenty years old, a student at the university?”

“Yeah.” Will said, wondering where this conversation was going to go. The woman nodded, her lips pursed, as her eyes flickered over his hands.

“You’re quite the fighter, I’m told.” She said. “You go to the Dojo here in town?”

“That’s right.” Will said, greatly suspecting that he was being set up for the anvil to drop. The woman nodded, her black bangs falling across her face. Will suddenly realized that she was quite pretty. She couldn’t have been over thirty.

“And you have been training for a long time?”

“What does that have to do with anything, officer?” Will asked sharply. The woman stared at him, her gaze rather hard. Will stared back, nonplussed.

The man behind her stepped forward.

“Will.” He said. “Please answer the question.”

“Of course I have.”

“As a hobby or-?”

“Why did you drag me here?” Will interrupted. “What has this got to do with anything?” Stefani frowned at him as she straightened up her posture. She wasn’t a short woman, but Will hardly felt intimidated by her.

“We simply wanted to ask you a few questions.” She said evenly. “That’s all.”

“You could have done so without bringing me here.” Will shot back. “And throwing me into a cell- for no reason.” He threw the last three words out at the spur of the moment, without even really thinking about it. His eyes focused on Stefani, who suddenly stiffened. Ratcliffe looked even more surprised.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Will asked, as he leaned forward, as if about to get up. “You had no right to bring me here.”

“I think.” Stefani said, her voice cold. “That you should stay seated.”

He stood up. He towered over her, staring down at her coldly. She stood as well, staring back.

“Why did you bring me here?” He asked again.

“I will not ask you again.” She said. “Sit down.”

They stared at each other.

“Will.” Ratcliffe said complacently. “We just wanted to ask you a few questions. About what just happened right now. There’s nothing to be afraid of-“

Will looked at him, a little coldly at first, and then began to relax. “Did you have a good reason?”

“A very good reason.” Stefani said. “Sit down.”

Will gave her a look and then bent over, finding a seat on the top of the white table, placing his feet on the chair for balance. Stefani stared at him, her lip curling.

“You truly are trying my patience.”

“Will.” Ratcliffe said, stepping forward again. “Where were you on the afternoon of October 10th?”

“The 10th?” Will repeated. That was just a couple of days ago. That was the day that-

“Class, probably.” Will said. “I don’t remember exactly.”

“Has anything strange happened to you in the past couple of days?”

Will felt a strong urge to come clean, to tell the officers everything about Alice. How he had come across her, how they had met, how he had taken her to Jason’s. But her request was still very much heavy on his mind.

“No police, no!”

“A girl asked me out.” He said. “Normally I have to make the first move. But that’s not illegal, is it?”

Ratcliffe seemed to almost smile. “No, it isn’t.” He said. “Who was this girl?”

“Just this girl I met on the bus.” Will said, his mind on Lysa and wondering what she would think of his creative description of their arranged meeting. “Other than that, though-“

“You haven’t been in any fights?”

Will tried to keep the expression on his face blank. “Well I’ve been going to the Dojo almost every day.” He said. “Unless something personal comes up… I don’t think I’ve missed a day since I went to go visit my parents.”

“Are you sure about that?” Stefani pressed.

“What does this have to do with anything?” Will asked, once again becoming annoyed. “I thought you wanted to talk about what happened at the Museum?”

“We do.” He said. “That man you chased had reported being attacked recently.”

Will felt his heart begin to beat a little faster. Stefani was staring at him rather intently.

“Attacked?” He repeated. “by-“

“By a Chinese man.” He said. “Perhaps a student?”

“I-“ He stopped, almost instinctively denying the allegation. Ratcliffe had not left much of an impression on him when they had first entered the room, but it seemed that he had far more experience with interrogation than Stefani did. He had snuck in the accusation almost casually.

“If this is about what happened at the exhibit-“

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?” Ratcliffe went on. “How the same man can be attacked twice, under different circumstances. What do you know?”

“What?”

“Why did you follow this man?”

“What?”

“What are you after?”

“Huh?”

Will was taken aback at the way the conversation had shifted. He closed his eyes and refocused his thinking. He brought himself back to that cell, to that calm, peaceful place in his mind. His mind slowly began to run through all of the facts. Alice didn’t want him HIM to go the police on HER behalf. But maybe… he could leave her out of this altogether.

He opened his eyes again and smiled knowingly at Ratcliffe. The intense look on his face faltered for a brief moment, before instantly hardening once more.

“Because.” He said. “I had seen the man commit a crime.”

Ratcliffe’s mouth fell open, and then shut again. His eyes flickered to Stefani, and then back to him.

“A likely story.” He said. “You-“

“The reason I didn’t come to the police.” Will said, his voice slow and considerate. “Is that I wasn’t sure what was going on. They stopped

a truck in the middle of the road, came out and spoke to me, and asked me not to tell anyone what I had seen. And then attacked me when I refused."

"Attacked?" Stefani repeated sharply. "They struck out at you first?"

"Yeah." Will said. "But they got more than what they bargained for. I defended myself and left. And today…. I saw him again."

"And took it upon yourself to bring him in?"

"He bolted when he saw me and I… uh, chased him without thinking about it." He admitted. "I didn't really have a plan…"

"You were there with your girlfriend… is that it?" Stefani asked.

"Nah." He said. "Just a friend." He gave a start. "Oh." He said. "She can corroborate my story, can't she? We went there because she wanted to teach me more about my heritage."

"We'll reach out to her." Stefani said. "And get her side of the story."

Will smiled at her. "Thank you."

"But why would these men attack you?" Stefani asked. "If they really did attack you, that is."

This was the moment of truth. Could he lie? Could he tell the truth? What was the best course of action?

"They did attack me." Will confirmed. "After trying to bribe me to walk away."

"Bribe?" Stefani repeated, her eyes narrowed. "They tried to bribe you?"

"Yeah." He said. "And they threw the bills on the ground when I said no."

She looked up at Ratcliffe. "There was money on the ground when they were found."

"Someone could have dropped it."

"That amount?" She countered. "If they had been attacked, or robbed, why didn't the attackers TAKE THE MONEY?"

“Stefani, we can discuss this after the interview is over.”

Stefani nodded, her eyes still alight with a bright fire, and stepped away from the table. Will stared at her, rather taken aback at her sudden change in attitude. She was staring more at Ratcliffe than him now, each of her fingers tapping against the wrist on her other hand.

“I didn’t want to take the money.” Will said. “I just wanted to get out of there, and by the time I got home…” He shrugged. “I thought it was over.”

“But you saw him again today.”

“Yes.”

Ratcliffe frowned. “And you chose to attack him again?”

“He ran.” Stefani insisted. “He didn’t WANT to be recognized there…”

“He didn’t want to be beat up again!” Ratcliffe said. “Please, Stefani. We will discuss this LATER.”

“I wish I could tell you more.” Will said. “But I have no idea who he is, or what he’s up to.”

“He isn’t up to anything.” Ratcliffe began.

“We don’t know that!” Stefani said sharply.

“Later, Stefani!” Ratcliffe said again, starting to become red in the face. He seemed to have somewhat lost his composure. Will sat stony faced in his seat, trying to make sense of the situation. There was clearly some kind of argument between the two brewing behind the scenes. He remembered the classic piece of wisdom from Sun Tzu:

Never interrupt your enemy while he is making a mistake.

He sat in silence as the two officers stared at each other.

“Will.” Stefani said, at last.

“Yes?”

“You may go home, but we will be keeping an eye on you.”

“Now hold on just a moment…”

“We have identified him.” She said. “You are a person of interest in this situation, Will. We will be in touch with you as our investigation continues.”

“I see.”

Will got to his feet. “Please call me if something comes up.”

“Now wait just a minute-“ Ratcliffe began, as Will turned to face him.

“Yes?”

Ratcliffe was quite a bit shorter than him and had to stare up at his eyes. “We’re not finished with you yet.”

“Well, what have I done wrong?”

Ratcliffe stared at him, awkwardly opening and closing his mouth like a fish, and then shut it again, his lips tight. Will turned away.

“I’ll be happy to come back in.” He said. “If you need any more information. But I’m not a criminal. I don’t get into fights for no reason. That man… he was up to something.” He gave a knowing look at Stefani.

“Thank you for your work, officers.” He said politely. “Good luck during your investigation. Excuse me.”

Fifteen minutes later he found himself on the front steps of the police station unable to quash the nervous ecstasy that was pounding through his veins. How in the world had he gotten out of that one? His heart had felt like it might have burst out of his chest.

Perhaps he was still in trouble, but the police wanted to fully understand the situation before charging him with anything. Perhaps he had somehow admitted to some sort of crime during the investigation. But at the same time, if they discovered that the man was involved with a sex trafficking ring surely his actions would be justified. And most importantly of all, he had completely managed to keep Alice out of it… just as she had wanted.

However he still felt a strong sense of unease. He had kept HER out of it… but now he was very much involved. He had run into the man once again already, and now the police were aware he was involved. Although nothing had happened today, he could see how things could easily spiral out of control.

But Alice was safe. And she was with Jason and Reiko. If she stayed out of things, if she stayed hidden, then maybe…

That was the most important thing. This wasn't about him.

He stepped down the sidewalk, his head bent, his hands in his pockets. He jumped as his phone rumbled against his fist. He stopped and reached for it, and slid it out of the pocket.

He had several messages. Several from Reiko, and one from a new number. A burst of fear burst through him: Was it from the police? But when he checked it he realized rather quickly that it was from Lysa.

Hello this is Lysa from the paper. Are you ready to schedule your interview?

Will's fingers twitched, seriously considering deleting the message, but instead responded. *Tomorrow?*

He probably could have set a proper time and date, but he was anxious to look at the barrage of messages from Reiko. She had sent over a dozen, each of them seeming more panicked than the last. Do you need a lawyer, do you want me to call your parents, Jason is worried, I'm worried, Will where ARE YOU?

He called her and she answered it with bated breath. She sounded almost like she had been crying.

"Will!"

"Hey." He said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

"What happened?" She demanded.

"They wanted to talk to me at the station." Will said. "About what happened."

"About-"

"I'll tell you all about it when I get back." Will promised. "Sorry to worry you."

Reiko didn't answer right away. Will could hear a rapid conversation with Jason over the phone.

"Let's have dinner at our place." She said quickly. "We're ordering… what do you want?"

After a brief conversation about food Will hung up the phone and made changed his direction, making his way to the small apartment where Jason and Reiko lived together in town. It was not far from the dojo: They had deliberately picked out the location for the dojo first, before moving into a nearby apartment. Will had been by only on occasion. Not because he was not welcome, but because Jason and Reiko were so busy with their lives that they hardly did anything but spend time alone together here. Generally they would host parties and events at their business, after closing hours. There was much more space and it was much nicer.

Will knocked on their door and waited. It was a couple of seconds before the door was answered by Jason.

"Hey." He said. "I heard that you got into a bit of trouble."

"It wasn't trouble." Will said defensively. "I'm fine."

Jason gave him a look. "If you're worried-" He began, but Will shook his head.

"Right now I'm not worried about anything." He said. "If something comes up I'll tell you, but right now…"

"Come on in." Jason said, holding the door open for him. Will nodded at him and stepped inside. The first thing he saw was Reiko and Alice sitting in the other room, looking at a book. Reiko did not seem to notice him: She was pressing her finger against the page and whispering towards Alice, who had looked up at him.

She let out a surprised noise and twitched. Reiko pulled back, surprised, and then looked up at Will.

“Oh!” She said, as she closed the book and got to her feet with a smile. “You got here before the food did.”

“Shame.” Will said, grinning. “What are you reading?”

“Oh, Roald Dahl.” She said, holding up a copy of Roald Dahl’s The WITCHES. “She can read English, a little, but I don’t think she’s ever read a real book before.”

Will stared at the book apprehensively. “Isn’t that book about… uh, children being…?”

Reiko pushed a finger to her lips and winked at him, before tilting her head at Alice. She was staring at Will rather intently.

“How about we get ready for dinner?” She said, as she set the book aside. “You better wash your hands, Alice.”

Alice cast a disappointed look at the book before getting to her feet and running her hands along her clothes, which looked brand new and well kept. She looked at Will and he moved aside, allowing her to pass.

“I’m trying to figure out what her past is like.” Reiko told him quietly, as she stepped up to him. “I’m trying to see how she reacts to stories like that. Stories that involve child abuse.”

“I don’t think she was abducted by Witches.”

Reiko giggled. “Well, I don’t either.” She said. “But I’m trying to ease her into it. I didn’t expect to get a straight answer right away.”

“It’s been a couple of days now.” Will recalled. “You still have no idea?”

“I have ideas.” She admitted him. “But let’s not talk about that now. What happened with the police?”

Jason came up from behind him and leaned against the door. “I’m curious about that too.’” He said. “They didn’t give you too hard of a time, did they?”

“They tried.” Will told him. “But they didn’t know what to make of the situation.” He quickly explained what had happened to them.

“Huh.” Jason said, frowning. “That’s weird. Why would they just let you go?”

“They didn’t say.”

Jason bent his head downward, thinking deeply. “If they really had something on you.” He said. “They would never have let you go. Something must have made them doubt the story they were told.”

“The Officer who was on my side mentioned money.” He said. “It made no sense to her that I would attack someone and then not take their money.”

“Hm.” Jason said. “Well, be careful, regardless. That was a close call. But it might have worked out for the best… the police are involved now.”

“What happened to not trusting the police?”

Jason waved his hand dismissively. “They’re like snakes.” He said. “If they don’t mess with you, you shouldn’t mess with them.”

“Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Reiko asked, putting a finger on her cheek.

“Well, you know what I mean.” Jason said. “Look, you can’t trust them, but don’t make them your enemy if you don’t have to. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Jason suddenly turned around, and Will caught a glimpse of Alice standing just behind him.

“Are you ready?” Jason asked kindly, smiling at her. The doorbell rang. “AH, that must be the food.” He took off, and Alice quickly followed him to the door.

“When did you start bringing her over here?” Will asked.

“Just today.” Reiko said. “It was about time to move her, I think. It was getting to be a bit of a pain to keep her at the dojo, and she was ready to be moved. I’ll be able to stay with her during the day when I’m not in class.”

“Excellent.” Will said. “I’m worried about her. I’m doing everything I can, but-“

“Please don’t.” Reiko said, sounding shocked. “You’ve done more than enough already, Will… Please. I think we have the situation well in hand. Right now it’s mostly a matter of finding a place for her to stay in the long term. Jason and I can’t keep her for more than a few months.”

Jason came back, bags of food in each hand, followed closely by Alice, who was grasping her own small package. “Here it is.” Jason said brightly. “Time to celebrate Will’s arrest and release!”

Reiko cheered sardonically while Will scowled.

The four of them sat down at the little square table in the kitchen. Will doubted that more than three people had ever been seated here at once due to the cramped quarters and Jason’s size. Jason reached into the bag and handed each of them their order. Reiko, some lobster. Will and Jason had ordered steak. Alice had ordered a small fish, perhaps salmon, and a small ordering of vegetables.

“It doesn’t look bad.” Will said.

“So four stars?” Reiko suggested.

“Eh, three.”

“Harsh.” Jason said, laughing. “You haven’t even taken a bite yet.”

He looked to Alice, who had not even grabbed a fork. She was staring down at her fish as if she had never seen one before. “Is something the matter, Alice?”

She looked up at him and then back down.

“Here.” He said. “I’ll cut it up for you, if you like…”

“Careful, Reiko.” Will said. “When was the last time he cut up your fish?”

“Uh, the last time he cooked?” Reiko responded. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“But when was that?” Will pressed. “Five, six months ago?”

“Last week, I think?” Jason asked, as he slid Alice’s plate over to him and raised her knife and fork. “We haven’t had time to cook. Because of our guest.”

“Do you even know how to cook, Will?”

“I don’t.” Will admitted. “But I’m a college student, I have an excuse.”

“That’s what they all say.” Reiko said, laughing. “But I cooked for myself all throughout school. The only reason I don’t now is because I got married, and get to share the work.”

“Lucky you.” Jason said dryly, as he handed the plate back to Alice, who quietly accepted it.

“How often do you alternate cooking?” Will asked, genuinely curious. “What, three times a week each, and then you eat out?”

“We don’t really have a schedule. We’re good at cooking different things. It depends on what we want, right Jason?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Alice, do you like to cook?”

The question came out of nowhere. Alice looked up, looking positively shocked that the three people sitting with her were staring at her expectantly. She stared back at them, her eyes flitting in between each of them, before shaking her head and muttering something.

“She doesn’t.” Reiko said. “But she would love to learn.” She leaned in closer. “We can cook together tomorrow, okay?” She said. “We’ll start with something simple and then go from there. We can’t order food every night.”

“I could.” Will said, yawning.

All in all they had a very pleasant evening. When all was said and done and Will was getting ready to leave, he found himself feeling a little bit wistful. He had no idea just what he would do without these people in his life.

“Promise to keep me up to date on the case?” Jason asked him. “Reiko could recommend you a good lawyer, if you need one.”

“Yeah, I think I might need to consider that.” Will said, nodding. “Thanks. I’ll see you later.” He waved good bye to Jason, Reiko, and Alice before seeing himself out the door, closing it behind him.

It was very late: He had completely lost track of time due to their trip, the chase, the interrogation, and the dinner. He hurried home almost immediately, half expecting something to come jumping out at him in the dark. But there was no one. The streets were empty and lonely as he made his way back to campus and back to his home.

Wolf was sitting up again, drinking, bottles piling up on the desk in front of him as he fired away at his enemies in his game. Will did not even speak to him as he stepped past him, and to his room. Once again he found himself very glad when he crawled into bed and closed his eyes. At the very least, at the end of a long, hard day, there was always this to look forward to.

He was woken up by the buzzing of his phone. He instinctively grabbed it and gave it a glance.

“Coffee, 10:30?”

It was from Lysa. Will stared at it, not entirely comprehending the words, as he glanced at the clock. It was 10:15.

“Shit.”

He rolled out of bed and furiously began typing out a response. *“Just woke up. Getting ready. Where are you?”* He didn’t think she would take kindly to rescheduling entirely, but he imagined she would be willing to wait a few minutes.

He took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and had grabbed the phone again in less than ten minutes.

“Rude. I have other things to do today.” A flicker of annoyance passed through Will as he read the message. She had no right to be snippy with him. What was she expecting? He had only just woken up.

He was about to tell her so when she sent him another message. "*Coffee. Now."* With her location. Will stared at it, wondering just what to make of it. His finger hovered over the screen on his phone, wondering whether he should tell her to fuck off, before deciding against it. He'd tell her how obnoxious she was being in person.

He left his room and walked past Wolf, who it seemed had not gone to bed at all, and headed out the door. Lysa was, apparently, quite a long walk away, and so he had no choice but to run. He had just missed the 10:30 bus, and it would be quicker for him to just go there on foot rather than wait for the next bus. He felt like an idiot running to meet a girl he was starting to feel he didn't want anything to do with, but he wasn't doing this for himself. This was for Alice.

There were several coffee shops in town, but most of the students frequented the ones on campus. Thankfully Lysa had elected to choose one of those, so the run was not as far as it could have been. He stepped up to the door, rubbed his sweat away with his hand, and stepped inside.

The room was very big and spacious. As it was a campus location it was packed with people at all times of day. Will usually dropped by to work on his own at one of the desks, but plenty of people loved to meet with friends here and gossip for fifteen minutes or so in between classes or other responsibilities.

The girl was sitting in the exact opposite place he normally would. He favored the small, quiet nook in the corner that was a good distance away from the rest of the crowd, but she had chosen to sit and wait for him in the exact center of the mob. Her bright orange hair stuck out horribly from everyone else around her, and she was completely alone. Will found himself gritting his teeth as he pushed his way through the crowd towards her. Groups of people sat huddled deep together, discussing philosophy, comparing notes on science, and sharing complaints about professors.

She was looking down at her notepad as he approached- he was able to make out neat little scribbles on the paper before she slammed it shut and looked up at him.

"Oh-"

Her expression morphed from annoyed to pleased to furious, in very quick succession.

"Where were you?" She asked, her voice loud and grating. "I've been waiting for twenty minutes!"

Only twenty? He thought to himself, bemused. She had contacted him about half an hour ago. He had thought she had already been waiting that long. He had expected that she had been sitting here for forty five minutes or an hour by herself, not a mere twenty minutes.

"Sorry." He said. "I overslept."

"Did you?" She sniffed, seemingly not at all placated. She waved her head in front of her. "Have a seat."

He did as he was told, staring at her as she bustled with her things. He was beginning to regret this little idea. He had no idea who this girl was or what she was about. Everything about her demeanor and attitude gave him a bad vibe.

"Now." She said, as she spun her pen in her hand and looked up at him. "You say you know of the missing girl?"

"Yeah." Will said, leaning back in his chair considering her carefully. He remembered Jason's words of warning, that they didn't know who they could trust. He couldn't tell her too much about Alice.

"So." Lysa said. "You say that you know of the missing girl."

"That's right." Will said. "She's a friend of mine."

"I was told that she was not a student here."

"She's not." Will acknowledged. "But we did meet here."

"How long have you known each other?" Lysa said amicably, as she raised the pen to paper.

Will gave a wry smile. "A couple of days."

The pen froze over the paper. She looked up at him, her eyes a little suspicious.

“A couple of days?” She repeated. “What do you-“

He leaned in closer. “Yeah.” He said. “A couple of days. I’m the one looking after her.”

She was staring at him now. “You… you’re the one who kidnapped her?” She asked. The tip of her pencil snapped against the parchment.

“No, of course not.” Will said. “I rescued her from her kidnappers. I’m keeping her safe.”

“You-“

“I saw her, on the street.” Will recollected. “Trying to get away from some strange men. She pulled away from them, came to me, and I… chased them off.”

“Chased them…?” She was sounding more amazed now. She reached to her side and pulled out another pencil. “Forgive me, but this sounds somewhat unbelievable… have you any proof…?” Despite her words she was sounding very excited.

“No.” He said. “But that’s why I wanted to talk to you about it. You covered the story, I thought that you… you, of all people… might be able to help expose these people.

“Me?” She suddenly looked very flattered. She leaned in closer to him. “Where is she? How is she doing?”

“She’s well.” Will affirmed. “But I shouldn’t tell you where she is… not here.” He paused. “I’ve seen one of her kidnappers on campus. Just yesterday, in fact.”

She reeled back in horror, and then quickly leaned in again.

“Why haven’t you gone to the police?”

“She asked me not to go the police.” He said. “She doesn’t trust them. I don’t know why, or how… But…”

“That’s good.” She said breathlessly. “I don’t trust them either. All these shootings lately… The racial profiling… it’s out of control. She’s probably been a victim of theirs, too.”

“That’s what we think, yeah.”

She was scribbling very violently on her pad now. Will had no idea what she was doing. After a while she looked back up at him and smiled.

“This is incredible!” She said. “A kidnapping, here, on campus…!” She paused, tapping the pen against the pad thoughtfully. “But then… if she was reported missing…”

“Apparently.” Will said. “The kidnappers went to the police and reported her disappearance. Which is what you covered.”

She gave him a surprised look. “What?” She replied, taken aback. “Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know.” He said. “There’s a lot I don’t know.”

She stared at him, wide eyed, as his eyes glanced downward at the table in between them.

“Why did you come to me?” She asked, her voice quiet. “I mean… I’m just a reporter of the newspaper. I just wrote the story they told me to cover. I don’t-“

“I think.” Will said. “That students need to know that something weird is happening on campus. I thought that you might be able to help with that.”

The girl blinked at him. She seemed somewhat at a loss for words.

“You think I could-“

“I think it’s possible.” Will said. “If you’re willing.”

“Oh no.” She said quickly, shaking her head. “I want to help, it’s just… well…. Um, do you understand how the newspaper works? At all?”

“Uh, no.”

“Well, I can’t just write whatever I want.” She said. “I mean, I became a writer because I wanted to talk about feminism and women’s issues. If I could write about that sort of thing all the time, I would. But I need to get my editor’s approval, I need to keep in

mind everything else that's going on… and plenty of people don't read the paper aside from the headline anyway. I'm not sure if-"

"You're overthinking it." Will said. "One small step at a time, alright? Focus on that first step. What can you do, right now, to help people ask questions about this situation?"

Lysa closed her eyes and leaned back, thinking deeply. "Twitter." She said at last, after a pause. "I can talk about this on twitter. Real professionals follow me on there, and maybe I can get some sort of attention on this."

"Really?" Will asked, baffled. "It's that easy." She smiled at him.

"Well, like you said… it's a first step. " She said. "One small step for woman, one large step for women's rights! Or something like that."

Will almost laughed. "Yeah, that sounds great." He said. "What's your twitter? I'll retweet everything you put out about it."

She told him and he whipped out his phone, opened up twitter, and found her username.

Lysa Sanders @SandyShoreSocialism

Political Lesbian, writer, aspiring journalist, woman. She/Her

He hit follow and then stood up. "I've got to be going." He said. "But I'll get in touch if anything happens."

"Ooooh, please do." She said, also standing up. "It was a pleasure." He smiled at her and gave her a small wave before turning away.

"Oh!"

Will turned back, somewhat surprised, to look back at her. She was staring past him towards the doors, her mouth open like a fish. Will turned back to where she was staring and his eyes fell on a young man leaning against the wall, seemingly looking their way. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes, so it was hard to know for sure, but going by the way that Lysa had reacted…

He turned back to her. "Who's that?"

“Er, no one!” She said quickly. “I mean… Uh, I mean…” She struggled for a minute before looking hopelessly around, and then back at Will.

“Walk me home!” She blurted out. Her face was turning red, and she seemed somehow embarrassed.

“Walk you home?” Will repeated. “What’s wrong? Who is he?”

“I… That’s none of your business!” She spluttered, somehow becoming even redder. “Are you going to do it, or not?”

“Of course I am.” Will said, surprised. “I’d be happy to.”

Lysa froze, looking very surprised, before breaking out into a wide smile. She seemed to almost be glowing. “Really? Wow, thanks?”

“Come on, then.” He said, tilting his head. “We’ll go out the other door.”

“Hang on, let me gather my things.” She said hurriedly, as she reached for her bag. Will stood there waiting as she haphazardly threw her things into a rather pink backpack that otherwise seemed neatly organized. She looked as if she were in a rush to leave. She had stood up before she had even zipped up her bag.

“Got everything?” Will asked. She nodded furiously, her eyes fluttering to the door. “Alright. Come on. Where do you live?”

“Not far.” She said. She cast an anxious look at the door again before turning back to him. “Um, can we walk fast?”

“Of course.” Will said. “If you can keep up.”

“What do you mean, if I can keep up?” She asked, scowling.

“On those tiny legs?”

She gave him a shocked look. “I used to do track you know.” She said, huffing. “I was never exactly GOOD at it, but…”

Will laughed at her. “Alright.” He said. “Want to run there together?”

“With this bag?” She asked him, as she adjusted the bag on her back. It looked bigger and heavier than she did.

“I could do it.”

“You could not!”

“I could carry you and the bag.”

“You wouldn’t!”

He led her down out the door and down the stairs. Despite Lysa’s growing anger at him, he made sure to keep an eye on the guy in the corner. He was following them.

“You’re not that heavy.” Will said. “I could do it.”

“It’s not a matter of COULD.” Lysa said, stressing the last word. “It’s a matter of WOULD. I can walk, thank you very much.”

Lysa turned rather suddenly as she turned back around her at the man following behind them. He made no move to disguise himself, but he stayed a distance away, near the door.

“I’m watching him, don’t worry.” Will said.

“I can take care of myself, thank you!” She snapped, this time seemingly genuinely annoyed.

“You just need to me to walk you home, that’s all.”

Her mouth fell open again and she stared up at him, again at a loss for words.

“Come on.” He said. “Let’s get you home.”

They set off again, her trailing a little bit behind him, as the man in the black coat continued following them. Will thought t prudent to now break the ice.

“So who is he?”

“Wha-?” She looked up at him, surprised. “I, uh, don’t know.” She said, sounding rather lame. “I probably, uh, wrote about him or something and forgot about it.”

“Is he dangerous?” Will asked her gently. “Do you want me to call the cops?”

“No, no, just walk me home, that’s all.” She said quickly, her voice rather high pitched. “Thank you…”

She seemed rather firm on that point. Will wondered whether he should simply just take her to the police station and force her to file a report, but decided against it. If she had refused his help, she likely had a very good reason for it. They were very nearly strangers, after all.

“So where do you live?”

“It’s right over here…”

It turned out to be right across the street. Will remembered how upset she had been that she had been left waiting in the coffee shop, alone. She could have easily just gone back home and waited for him to show up.

“This is it.” She said, as she stopped in front of her door and turned around to face him. “Hey, thanks a lot.”

“No problem.” Will said. “Take care of yourself, alright? And don’t forget about the girl.”

She smirked at him. “Oh, I won’t.” She said. “Oooooh, this is so exciting!”

She opened the door, gave him one last wave, and then stepped inside.

That had gone a bit better than he could have expected. She had been surprisingly enthusiastic at the idea of helping out a girl in need. He had expected to be asked to do SOMETHING for her… but then again, she was trying to be a journalist. She could probably use this experience to propel herself into a real career.

Will turned around to face the man in the black sunglasses.

“Can I help you?” Will asked roughly. He half expected the man to back away and apologize, but he was surprised when he instead stepped forward.

“Hey man.” He said. “Can I talk to you for a bit?”

“Me?” Will asked, completely taken aback. Due to the way that Lysa had been acting he had immediately assumed that the man wanted to speak to her.

“Yeah.” He said. “Uh, maybe not right next to the building? Walk with me.”

“Sure.” Will said, wondering where this going to go as they set off together down the street. He half expected the man to whirl on him or attack, but no. They merely walked along, as if they already knew each other.

“The name’s Damon.” The guy said, tilting his head towards him. “Yours?”

“Will Wei.”

Damon held out his hand to shake, and Will, after hesitating for a moment, took it. Damon winced.

“Nice handshake.” He said.

“Sorry.” Will said. “I didn’t-“

“Nah, it’s fine.” He said, waving him aside. “Consider my….. uh, apology for worrying you back there.”

Will pulled his hand back and placed it in his pocket. “So are you going to explain?” He asked. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.’ Damon said quickly. “I, uh… Wanted to talk to you about… that girl…”

The way he said it made Will instantly think of Alice. “Huh?”

“That girl, Lysa….” He said. “She’s trouble, man.”

Of course he was talking about Lysa. He was starting to become paranoid.

“What about her?” Damon looked around towards the building, as if looking to make sure they weren’t being watched.

“She’s a nut, man.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t talk to her again.” Damon said. “Just…. Delete her number from her phone and don’t answer if she calls.”

“Why?”

“Cause she’s crazy. That’s why.”

“Wait, I need you to back up.” Wills said. “Crazy how?”

“She’ll fuck you man.” The guy warned you. “And not in the way you want.”

“Now wait just a minute-“

“I know, I know.” Damon said, raising a hand to him. “I know you don’t want to hear it. But you look like a smart guy. Smarter than me, at any rate. Just watch out and you’ll be just fine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you… okay, buddy?”

He clapped him on the arm and then walked away. Will stared after him, open mouthed, almost as if to call out to him, but suddenly thought better of it. He closed his lips and turned back around to the street.

He was way behind on studying. He returned to his home to collect his things to find Wolf scarfing down an entire pizza that had not been there when he had left. He grabbed his back and took off again to Jason and Reiko’s place.

Reiko was home.

“Oh Will!” She said, smiling a little as she let him inside. “What brings you here?”

“I thought I could come by and study.” Will told her, as he showed her his bag. “I’ve been getting a little behind…”

“Yes, yes…” Reiko said, yawning slightly. “ I have been as well. Alice has been… quite a handful.” She looked exhausted. Will suddenly appreciated just how much she had sacrificed to look after her.

“Where is she?”

“Asleep, for now.” She said. “Can I get you anything to eat?”

“Sure.” He said. “But Reiko, have you been sleeping?”

“Not at all.” She confessed, as she led him back into the kitchen. “Alice keeps making these noises in the night… she panics a lot. Sometimes she doesn’t seem to remember where she is…”

“Nightmares?”

“Night Terrors, more like.” She affirmed, as she reached for her pots and pans. “It’s the same thing every night. ‘Please, please, stay away from me. Do not touch me. No, no.’ Do you want chicken?”

“Yes.”

She took the chicken out of the refrigerator and laid it on the counter and prepared to open the package.

“She’s been through a lot.” Reiko said, as she set the chicken into a pan and turned up the heat. “A lot.” She yawned again, and Will suddenly felt a little bit bad about having her cook for him.

“How much sleep have you been getting, Reiko?”

“Sleep?” She repeated vaguely. “Oh, don’t use that word in front of me…” She yawned again. “I don’t have time to sleep.”

“You haven’t slept at all?” Will repeated, horrified.

“How could I?” Reiko asked. “Eight hours of classes. My home life, helping out at Jason’s dojo, studying, and now, looking after Alice…”

Will stood up.

“You need to get some sleep.” He said.

“You sound like Jason.” She said amicably, as she reached for a spatula. “But I have too much I need to do… I have that speech to give in a couple of hours, and I have to look after Alice until then…”

Will stood up.

“Reiko.” He said. “I’ll look after Alice. You get some sleep.”

She turned around to face him. “What?”

“Come on.” He said. “Get to bed. I’ll look after her. Until Jason gets back, at least.”

“I-“

Smoke was beginning to rise from the pan.

“Go on.” Will sad. “I’ll wake you in three hours.”

She smiled ruefully. “I have to be there in two and a half.”

“Two then.”

She nodded, smiled at him, and slowly made her way across the room. She opened a door and stepped inside. Will could hear a loud THUMPING noise. It sounded like she had just fallen straight into bed.

He turned back to the still smoking chicken. Reiko had not turned off the stove. He searched a little bit for the thermometer, but wasn’t familiar enough with the kitchen to have an idea where it could be. He searched a couple of minutes for it, and by the time he found it the chicken looked almost burnt.

Well, at least it wasn’t undercooked. He thought to himself wryly as he cut it open with his knife, his school books on the side. He reviewed his assignments in between bites, trying to ignore the poor texture of his chicken.

He had barely gotten through some more of his history when the door in the hall opened. Will looked up, half expecting to see Reiko rushing back in to shut off the stove, but instead heard a small gasp and instead see Alice standing there, staring at him.

“Oh, hi.” Will said, as he moved his finger from the page he was about to turn. “How are you?”

She did not answer. She simply stood there and stared at him. Will looked back up at her and frowned.

“Are you alright?” He asked her. “Are you hungry?”

She stared at the stove, and the plate that was still sitting in front of him and then vehemently shook her head. He still had a little burnt chicken on his plate. It probably didn’t look all that appetizing.

“How about some tea then?” Will asked her, as he stood up. He reached for the pitcher that Reiko always kept sitting on the counter

and a glass from the cupboard. She watched him as he set the glass down on the table, in front of the seat right next to him.

"Sit down."

He was surprised when she instantly moved to sit by him. She sat almost ramrod straight, unusually so. She did not cross her legs, and instead simply sat with her hands folded in front of her. She looked at the tea, and then at his book. She raised her hand to the cup and took it. She did not drink, and simply held it in her hands.

"It's not poison." Will said, amused, watching her, the book lay forgotten in front of him. The girl stared at it for a moment longer before taking a sip. She lay it down again and once more began staring at the page. Her eyes trailed downwards, across his face, to his arms and hands, and then finally to the book sitting out in front of him.

She spoke, a faint utterance of some foreign language on her lips, as she reached out a touched the page.

"This?" Will asked, as he bent down to look at it. He had not bothered to look at the illustrations, since he had been focusing mostly on the text.

The map was an illustration of the trade routes in between 17th century between Western Europe and Eastern America. Little lines dotted the oceans where ships traveled carrying goods and other supplies to the colonies and back again.

"It's a map." He explained. "It's showing the Atlantic Ocean… see here?" He pressed his finger against the American side of the map and ran his finger in a circle around it. "This is where we are. Hundreds of years ago, the people who founded this country settled here from over here…" He trailed his hand over to the other side of the map. "But for a long time these distant places kept in close contact with one another. See these arrows? These are the paths that the ships took."

"Ships?"

He looked up at her, surprised. He did not think he had ever heard her speak English before. It took him a moment for him to realize that she was asking a question.

“Hundreds of years ago.” He explained, trying not to let his surprise show in his voice. “The primary method of transporting goods was by Sea. So people would build giant ships that could sail the waters and transport goods. Tea, wood, fabrics… All sorts of things.”

She stared down at the page.

“Goods…” She repeated. “I am…” She fell silent, staring down at the page somewhat absently. Will stared at her.

“Alice.” He said. “Were you brought here by sea?”

She turned her head away from him and looked down at the table. Will continued staring at her. More and more questions were bursting through his mind, but he knew that he kept pushing forward he could upset her. He had to be gentle. He had to be subtle.

“Both the English and the French have history here.” He went on, tapping the respective countries with his finger. “They fought over this land and its resources, entered wars with the natives and each other. When the English eventually won, they had another war amongst themselves, the Revolutionary War, which led to the birth of this country.”

She didn’t seem to be as responsive now. She had that blank, distant look on her reference. It was like she completely lacked all frame of reference from what he was talking about. But at the same time, she was still listening, and seemed to have become more comfortable.

“Back then the only way to get here was by ship.” He went on. “And these are the routes that the captains and crews of those ships realized were the quickest and most efficient to conduct their business.”

He looked back at her, gauging her reaction. She was staring back at the page again, somewhat transfixed.

“This is all stuff you should have learned in school, of course.” Will said. She looked up at him, gaping like a fish.

“School?” she repeated. “I… never…” She paused, took in a breath, and then looked back at him. A spark of genuine interest seemed to fill her eyes. “What is it like?”

“School?” Will repeated. “It’s… school.” He had no idea how to explain it to her. “It’s a place where you learn more about things. People teach you about… things like this. History and economics and things like that.”

She remained silent; her lips pursed. Will had an inkling that the education aspect wasn’t what she was interested in.

“Kids everywhere go.” He said. “It’s where you meet a lot of your earliest friends… “ She moved a little at that, and suddenly seemed more interested. Will went onward. “You’re grouped with a lot of people your own age, and you learn things together.”

He watched her carefully, trying to gauge her reaction, but she seemed somehow unresponsive, although he could see that she was still listening very intently. He found himself extremely intrigued by this response.

“I never liked school.” Will confessed, leaning back in the chair from her. “My parents were never really happy with my grades and what I was doing in my free time.” She gave a small start and stared at him, open mouthed. He continued. “At first it really bothered me, but as I got older it stopped being so much of an issue. School wasn’t really all that important to me.”

“You didn’t like your friends?”

“My best friends were outside of school.” Will said. “And most of the things I know and memories I value came from them.”

He had expected her to speak again, but she did not. She clutched the neckline of her shirt with her fingers but said nothing. Will stared at her expectantly, wondering whether he should keep speaking. He thought he should ask her a question, hesitated for a moment, and then went on ahead.

“Do you want to go to school?”

She looked up at him again, her eyes misty. “I want to be normal.”

Will fell silent. He turned his head down to the book before him. He could not bring himself to say another word.

She sat there with him as he worked, watching him intently as he tried to focus on his work. His fingers seemed to move of their own accord, out of sheer reflex. His heart wasn’t in what he was doing at all. He couldn’t tear his thoughts away from the girl sitting across from him. Reiko must have been having the same kinds of feelings.

He jolted a little, turning to the clock on the kitchen counter in horror. He relaxed a little bit as he saw that it was not quite time to wake her up yet. But his sudden movement startled Alice, who yelped and backed away from the table.

“Oh!” Will said, as he got to his feet and looked at her. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you alright?”

She whimpered a little and slid out of the chair and backed away even further. Will stared at her mortified. The sudden movement had terrified her out of her wits.

“Hey…” He said, stepping closer to her. “I didn’t mean-“

She shrieked and pressed herself closer against the kitchen cabinet: the pressure of her movement knocking over a number of glass plates that fell to the ground and shattered around her feet. She winced again and froze, curling herself into a smaller shape, as if to protect herself. Will stared at her for a moment, not wanting to move closer to her.

“Be careful.” He said at last. “Don’t stop on the glass.”

She was barefoot. She did not move or show any sign of acknowledging him at all. Will tried to figure out the situation. There was no other way around it. He was still wearing his shoes. He would have to move her.

“Hey…”

He stepped towards her. She let out another shriek and raised her foot. Like lightning Will shot forward and wrapped her arms around her waist and hoisted her off the ground.

She screamed wildly, struggling vehemently as he carried her away from the broken glass and tried to set her down again. She was struggling so much that he had no choice but to outright drop her: she hit the ground and scrambled away from him, still whimpering pitifully.

The door to the room opened.

"What's happening?" Reiko cried, brandishing a broom in front of her threateningly. "Who's there? Shane? Where are-"

"Easy, Reiko." Will said soothingly. "It's just us."

Reiko lowered the broom and looked at him, surprised, before catching sight of Alice. She let out a cry, and dropping the makeshift weapon she knelt down by her side.

"Alice!" She exclaimed. "What happened?"

She wailed in response. Reiko cast a weary eye up at Will, who shook his head, and then on the shattered plates on the floor.

"I can't leave you alone for a moment." Reiko said, sighing, as she held out a hand to Alice. "Come on. Could you give us a moment, Will?"

Will nodded and stared respectfully aside and Reiko stood and led Alice to the other room. The door shut behind them.

Will cast a glance at the clock, and seeing that Reiko still had time, turned back to his books. He stopped mid step and cast a guilty glance at the glass all over the floor. He had found a broom and was busy sweeping up the mess when Reiko re-entered the room, once again shutting the door behind her.

"What happened?" She asked in a hushed tone. "She's calmed down, but she didn't explain…?"

Will explained what had happened as he worked. By the time he had finished Reiko was shaking her head.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have let you alone with her…” She said. “I’m so sorry, I should have realized it was a bad idea…”

“No, it was my fault.” He said quickly. “I shouldn’t have scared her.”

“There was nothing you could have done, Will.” She said, sounding tired. “You were only trying to help.” She rubbed her eye. She still looked exhausted. It looked as if her nap hadn’t done her a lot of favors.

“I should be doing more-“

“No, Jason and I have it completely under control.” She said, her voice suddenly sharp. “I don’t want you doing anything reckless again. Not after what happened at the museum.”

“I’m not reckless-“

“You don’t mean to be.” She said. “But this is a very bad situation, Will. You could get hurt, or worse, lose focus on your studies… Look.” She sighed, as Will suddenly looked revolted. “Look.” She said. “We’re worried about you too, you know.”

“I-“

Before he could finish the sentence, Jason walked into the room.

“Hey.” He said casually, as he set his jacket on the back of the chair. “What are you doing here, Will?” His eyes fell on Reiko’s. “Where’s Alice?”

“She’s in the other room.” Reiko said. “We had a bit of an… incident.” She gave a look to Will. “Um, I’m going to have to go.” She said. “I’m really very busy at the moment… I’ll just say good-bye to Alice and then leave.”

“See you.” Jason said, smiling at her. She smiled back, waved good-bye to Will, and then walked to the hall. She opened the door to the room that Alice was in and said something, before closing it again and stepping out.

“What was this incident?” Jason asked him. Will snorted as he roughly sat back down in the chair.

“Beats me.” He said. “I moved quickly, and she freaked out.”

“Yeah, don’t do that.” Jason advised him, as he reached for a glass and filled it with water. Will snorted.

“I had that much figured out for myself, thanks.” He paused. “I’m more worried about Reiko, to be honest with you.”

Jason sat down across from him. “Yeah, I am too.” He admitted. “I thought she was overworking herself to begin with… what with helping out with the dojo and her academic work and things like that. But now we have this kid to worry about-“

“She’s not that young.” Will said. “Maybe you’ll be able to leave her alone for a bit, once she gets used to staying here.”

Jason fell silent. “Maybe.” He said. “But I don’t want to risk it. You’ve seen what happens if Reiko’s away from her for any period of time… she panics and goes nuts. She really had no one else to rely on. I think I scare her more than you do.”

“I wonder why.”

“Yeah well.” Jason said. “I can’t help being scary.” He took a sip of water. “I think she’s starting to warm up to me, though. She doesn’t flinch whenever I look at her.”

“What a step forward.”

“I think she’s going to be just fine.” Jason said. “Time heals all wounds, as they say.” He stood up. “Are you staying?”

“I might as well.” Will told him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

They sat idly and chatted as Will worked. Despite the rather lax atmosphere, Will knew Jason enough to tell that he was carefully watching the door to the room where Alice was resting.

“Do you have any ideas about what happened with me and the police?”

“That?” Jason snorted. “No idea. They didn’t try to charge with you anything?”

“Well, I did chase that guy-“

"Well, that's not a crime in and of itself." Jason said. "They might have thought you were up to no good, or would have hurt him if you got the chance… but if you managed to convince them otherwise…"

"They were arguing about what had happened." Will recalled. "The evidence and witness testimony must not have given them a clear idea on what happened."

"So they had to let you go." Jason said. "But they wanted to take you in, understand? Don't put yourself in that situation again."

"I'll try."

At that moment the door in the hallway creaked open and Alice peered out. Both Jason and Will turned to look at her.

"Hey kid." Jason said. "How are you feeling?"

Alice looked at them, but said nothing. She then stepped back into the room and closed the door.

"Upset." Jason told Will. "She'll come out when she's feeling better."

"Maybe I should go." Will said, as he began to gather his things. "And give her some space."

"Well she's not going to get used to you if you're not around." Jason said, sounding amused. "Reiko and I will be here more than usual… come on by tomorrow, if you like."

"I'll do that." Will promised. He bid his goodbyes, one to Jason and one to Alice through the door, as he left the apartment and headed out back to the street.

Both Jason and Reiko had been very clear with him: They didn't want him involved. On some level that was understandable, but on another it was very frustrating. He was already involved. If anything he had gotten them into this mess. He wondered whether it had been the right thing to take Alice to them rather than the police or back home. An image of Wolf's leering face hit his mind's eye and he shook his head violently. No, he certainly couldn't have done that. But the police would have been able to help.

Had he done the right thing, listening to Alice's one request? If he had gone straight to the police she might have gotten professional help. Jason and Reiko wouldn't need to wear themselves thin looking after her. He would be focused on his schoolwork and career, and Alice would be safe and happy. Surely a girl that was not quite in her right mind couldn't be expected to decide what was best for herself?

He stopped in the middle of the street, thinking deeply. No. If she made one request, and it was in his power to grant it… he began walking again, considering the question carefully. What was her reasoning? Why did she not want to go to the police? There had to be a reason. When he next saw her, maybe he could try and get her to explain.

He stopped again, and he could hear someone honking their car. A van slowly came by on the street next to him. He watched it absentmindedly, still deep in thought about his predicament. How best could he get Alice to talk about her past?

She had done so a little today, but that had happened by chance. Almost by accident. He had just been talking to her and then…

He turned away from the road and started walking again. An idea was beginning to creep into his head. She simply needed to trust him. And trust would take time.

He turned at the next crossing and continued down the sidewalk. How would he build trust with her? Was it possible? Could she even trust a stranger after what she had been through? Thoughts along those lines raced through his head at breakneck speed as he slowly walked down the sidewalk.

He did not go home right away. He did a couple of turns around the park, watching some girls play with their golden retriever, but did not find himself altogether too interested in what he was watching. He turned as the dog leapt several feet in the air and one of the girls let out an excited scream, and returned back home.

Wolf was passed out on the couch, bottle in hand, the movie playing on the screen flickering lights across his face. Will ignored him,

stepping past him and into his room, and shut the door behind him.

He lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He did not bother to undress or even remove his shoes. He was still deep in thought. He did not feel the slightest bit sleepy, even though he had class tomorrow.

He lay there for a while. He had already studied a little bit today, but he had not done a whole lot. Perhaps he could squeeze in a little bit more. Somehow the idea didn't seem very appealing. He could practice martial arts. He didn't feel like that, either, but he found himself sitting up and then stepping onto the floor.

"Ha!"

He jabbed forward, as quick as he could, with his right hand.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Three more punches. He began to jump up and down on his feet a little bit, leaning his head forward as he stared straight ahead at the wall in front of him. He imagined the wall taking the shape of the man he had chased the day before.

"Ha!"

He jabbed forward. He could feel the power and intensity behind the blow, although it hit nothing but air. He quickly pulled his hand back and then thrust it out again, followed by another punch. He pulled back and took a defensive position, weaving slightly. There was not a whole of room to maneuver in the room: It was not all that large. Will wanted to do spins and kicks, but if he did so in here he would probably smash into a shelf or his computer. He found himself pushing his door open and stepping out into the main room. Wolf was still asleep, but Will simply stepped right past him again and out into the street.

It was a cool October Night. It had not quite gotten cold, but it was a lot cooler than it had been just a month prior. Will stood on the porch, looked around, and after a moment's consideration stepped out into the street. There wasn't a soul in sight: It was quite dark by now, since it was weekday there was not a whole lot of activity

among the locals. He stepped out into the sidewalk and got into his fighting stance. He began practicing kicks right there on the sidewalk, conscientious of the occasional passerby. Most of his neighbors had become used to him doing this by now, and passed by without incident. However passing cars often slowed down as they passed him. He ignored most of these, even the car full of girls who stopped and catcalled at him. In about twenty minutes he felt ready to go back inside and go back to bed.

He turned back to the house and stepped up onto the porch. He turned around and stared back at the road. He watched a large, black van slowly pass by. He yawned, leaning over the side of the railing and staring out over the quiet street. He felt calm and relaxed, but the problem had not left his thoughts. What would have to do? What needed to be done?

He stood out on the porch for another ten, fifteen minutes staring out over the street. He thought back to when he was younger, before he had met Jason. His Father, seemingly tall at the time, very imposing, reprimanding him. His Mother, taller than her husband, her hands folded in front of her, silently watching them. Judging them.

He remembered how he had felt when he had first met Jason. An American man, who he had initially been very frightened of. He remembered Jason speaking to him for the first time. He had felt so alone, and then suddenly there was someone there.

Jason had not done anything special. Jason had simply been there, and been helpful, and always made time for him. Through him he met Reiko, and suddenly he had two close friends, not one.

He closed his eyes and leaned back. He had been overthinking this all along. All he had to do was be Alice's friend. Whenever he could.

Inspired, he turned back inside and started for his room. Wolf jolted irritably on the couch as he reached his room and shut the door. He was reaching for a pad and paper before he sat down at his small desk. He grabbed a pen out of his little tin and held it a loft. He began by writing out a schedule.

Monday. Class, Training, Class, Study with Alice.

Tuesday. Class, Class, Study, Training.

Wednesday….

He sketched out a vague outline for what his days were going to look like going forward. After he had finished he set his pen down and stared at it. His schedule, which was already very full, now seemed even more daunting. He would literally be spending all of his free time with Alice.

Well, there was nothing for it. He thought grimly, as he stood up and walked over to his bed. No one ever said that college would be easy.

He felt a little bit more relaxed, and soon found himself asleep. He woke up the next day as he usually did and slid out of bed. He felt somewhat light headed. He took a shower to wake himself up and headed out into the living room. Wolf was still there. He had woken up as well and had started playing another video game. Will did not speak to him as he made himself some fruit and stepped out the door with his things.

He checked his phone, more out of reflex than any genuine interest, and found that his phone had gotten several messages during the night. His first thought was honestly that someone had died, and he opened the messages in a panic. But to his surprise all of the messages, save one, were from the same person.

Lysa had sent him several messages. Not all of them had been sent during the night. He had been so distracted with working and thinking about Alice, he had not been checking his phone.

The first message was simple.

“Hey, did he give you any trouble?”

And then she had followed up with.

“Hello?”

Another message after that.

“Are you getting my messages?”

Another after that.

“Why are you ignoring me? What did I do?”

And after that…

“I don’t have to help you, you know!”

The next message several hours later.

“I’m going to bed. If I don’t wake up to an apology, we’re THROUGH.”

And one final message.

“I’ve begun work on the twitter account. Remember to retweet!”

Will gave one short message back. “Thanks.”

The other message was from Reiko. “Stay out of trouble!”

He responded. “I will, thanks Mom.” And pocketed the phone. Class would be starting soon. He needed to get going. He tried shoving Alice out of his mind for a movement as he reached the bus, boarded it, and sat down. He pulled out his book and began reading.

“Oops!”

A large book flew past him and smacked him the leg. It didn’t hurt, but he gave a surprised jump regardless.

“I’m sorry!” The girl said, as she leaned down over him to grab her book. She placed her hand on his leg for balance. “I have no idea what I was doing!”

“It’s fine.” Will said, as she leaned down and grabbed it. She pulled back, grinning sheepishly at him, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Um, can I sit here?” She asked. “You’re not with anyone, are you?”

Will cast a look behind her where two other girls were watching them, giggling amongst themselves.

“No, not right now.” He said.

“Great!” She chirped. She seemed to have taken that as an invitation and sat right down next to him. She was far taller than Lysa had

been, with long, beautiful black hair and fair skin. “I’m always seeing you with a book, but I’ve never seen you hit by one.” She laughed. Will nodded at her. He had never seen her before in his life.

“So.” She said. “What’s your name?”

He wasn’t much in the mood to talk. He still felt a little distracted in between his schedule. “Will.”

“Will?” She repeated. “You don’t look like a Will.”

He turned to her. “I don’t?”

She placed a finger on her cheek and stared at him. “No, you look more like… a Lee. Or a Bruce.” He couldn’t help it. He laughed. She smiled, seemingly encouraged.

“Alright then, Bruce.” She said. “I’ll just call you that.”

“What should I call you, then?” Will asked.

“Hm.” She said. “What do I look like to you?”

“What, you want me to guess your name?”

“I want to see what you think.” She pressed.

Her long black hair reminded him a lot of Officer Stefani, and he remembered how attractive he found her. “Stephanie.”

“Stephanie?” She repeated, bemused. “Do I really look like a Stephanie?”

“It’s a really pretty name.”

She blushed. The girls behind her erupted into excited sounding noises.

“What is your name?” Will asked, setting the book aside.

“Nora.”

“Nora?” He repeated.

“Well, Norelle.” She said. “But who names their daughter Norelle?”

“Your parents, apparently.”

“Ha ha.” She said. “I wouldn’t.”

“I like it.” Will said. “Where are your parents from?”

“Oh, I live on the East coast.” She said brightly. She paused. “Or… I did live there… before I moved here for school… But I’ll be moving back for the summer…”

He grinned. “You’re living here now.” He said. “Is this your first semester?”

“This is my second.” She said promptly.

“And you still don’t feel like it’s home?”

“Well…” She hesitated. “It’s a college town, right? I’m only here for school. I’ll be leaving again for work, right? It doesn’t make sense to me to think of this place as home.”

“I can see that.” Will said. “It’s different for me since I grew up here.”

“Ooooh, you’re local.” She said. “So you’ve never moved?”

“I’m living on campus now.” He said. “I’m not living with my parents or anything.”

“That’s good.” She said. “Where are you living?”

At this question he turned and looked out the window.

“Oh, my stop is coming up.” He said abruptly, as he gathered his things. “I’ve got to get to class.”

She suddenly looked very disappointed. “Oh, okay.” She said. “Um, I guess I’ll… see you around?”

“Yeah!” Will said, as he got to his feet. “It was nice meeting you… Excuse me.”

He pushed passed her and stepped off the bus, bag in hand. He turned and waved at Norelle as she passed by, and she waved back. He turned back around to the building and walked up the steps.

The girl he liked to call Hermione was sitting by herself. He sat by next to her. “On time today, are we?” She asked huffily. He set the bag on the table and procured his things.

“And you’re here early.” Will said. “Are you that excited to learn?”

She sniffed. “It’s why I am here.”

“Couldn’t you just read the book?” Will asked innocently. The girl glowered at him and he laughed at her expression.

Class proceeded as usual. Will found himself following along as usual, and took notes alongside the rest of the class. By the time class had ended Will felt very confident in his understanding of the material. He had worried that with everything that had been going on, he would fall behind.

“Good-bye.” The girl said gloomily as he gathered his things and stood up. He said his goodbyes and made his way to the door. It was time to get in some training before his next class. And then from there he could stop by the apartment and see Alice.

He walked a little bit quicker than he usually did. He wanted to get through his session as soon as possible. He got to the dojo quite a little bit earlier than he usually did.

Jason was here alone today. “Hey Will.” He greeted cordially, as he stepped from a ladder. Apparently he had been fixing a ceiling light in the lobby or other. “It’s been a while.”

“It hasn’t been that long.”

“Too long to spend not training.”

“Lots has happened.”

“I understand.” Jason said. “But you have to learn to deal with it, you know?”

“But I’m here now.” Will said, as he set his bag aside. “And I’m ready to work.”

Once they had gotten trained they spent a furious few hours working. Will, who had thought himself in the best shape in his life, found himself barely able to stand at the end.

“You would never have been able to handle that six months ago.” Jason observed, leaning against the mirror on the wall. He had done

everything he had asked Will to do, and looked as if he had not even broken a sweat.

“Yeah well… I’m not lazy.” Will said, panting.

“I know you’re not.” Jason said. “But never forget how important it is to keep pushing yourself. Okay? No matter what happens in your personal life.”

“I’ll remember.” Will promised, as he shakily straightened himself up. “How’s Alice?”

“Fine.” He said shortly. “Don’t you worry about her. She’s getting better all the time.”

“How so?”

“She’s started talking about herself.”

Will almost fell flat on his face out of surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Jason said. “Just a little bit.”

“About what happened to her?”

“No, nothing like that.” He said. “We still don’t know where she came or what she was brought here to do…”

Will let out a noise in his throat.

“Well, not exactly.” He elaborated. “But she did tell us about growing up. A little bit.”

“Yeah?”

“That’s right.” Jason said. “She talked to us about cooking and exercise.”

“Cooking… and exercise?”

“Yeah.” Jason said. “She knows how to prepare vegetables pretty well. And she’s very active. I’m always seeing her stretching and such.”

“Stretching? Like…-“

“Yoga poses, things like that.” He said. “Like, really advanced stuff.”

“Advanced yoga?” Will wrinkled his nose doubtfully.

“It’s a lot harder than you think.” Jason said. “I’ve been researching that, watching a bunch of youtube videos-“

“Poor you-“

“To me.” Jason said. “It seems like she was taken very good care of. Her diet was clean, she knows how to take care of herself, she even exercises.”

“What are you getting at?” Will asked, becoming increasingly interested.

“It feels like she was raised.” Jason said, his voice slow and deliberate. “To become what she is today.”

Will stared at him. “You mean to say-“

“Yeah.” He said. “She’s Eurasian. There have been studies done that show that Eurasian women are the most attractive on the planet. She’s in very good physical condition-“

“Stop.” Will said. “You’re saying she was… raised to be abused?”

“Yeah.” Jason said. “That’s the impression I get by watching her, anyway. There’s nothing wrong with her physically. All of her problems are mental.”

Will crossed his arms. “So what is she, exactly?” He asked. “A prostitute?”

“No.” Jason said. “A prostitute has agency. She would have come here of her own free will if she were one. No, she was forced to come here. By someone. Someone she was anxious to get away from.”

Will recalled how she had burst out of the back out of the moving van and stumbled out into the street. He felt his fist tighten.

“Why is she here?” Will asked. “She’s not American, right?”

“Oh, definitely.” Jason said. “We still haven’t figured out which country. She’s definitely not from Japan. Reiko says her dialect and

accent are all over the place. The language was taught to her by someone who wasn't a native speaker."

"Hm." Will said, folding his arms. "She told me that she came by boat."

"Did she?" Jason said, sounding surprised. "You should have said something. If she came from Europe, that probably meant she crossed the Atlantic."

"Why send her by boat though?" Will asked. "Why not a plane?"

"Probably more subtle." Jason answered. "Not a lot of people will ask questions, she might have had a room to herself and her handler-"

"Handler?"

"There's no way that she crossed by herself." Jason said. "Those men you fought? They were making sure she was getting to where she needed to be."

Handlers… Something about that word made Will feel even more angry.

"Where was she going?" Will demanded. "Why was she here?"

"That I don't know."

Will groaned exasperatedly. "She has to know." He said. "She has to tell us. We can help her."

"I'm sure she's aware." Jason said. "On some level. But she may not understand fully what has happened to her. To her this has been her entire life. That was her normal."

Will could not find the words to respond. His mind suddenly became a complete blank. Normal. This was her life. This was what she was. This was all she was ever going to be.

"I know how you feel." Jason said. "It's a disgusting situation. Reiko and I are doing everything in our power to help her. You don't have to worry-"

"Worry?" Will repeated quietly. "I'm not worried." His voice was venomous. "I'm pissed off."

Jason nodded at him. “Like I said, I get it.” He said. “But it’s all over now. Alice is safe with us. We just have to find a place for her, away from these people. She’s going to be fine.”

“Will she though?” Will asked. “No one should go through that.”

Jason suddenly looked very sad. “It happens all the time.”

Will left the dojo in a very bad mood, still thinking about Alice. For the first time he saw the bigger picture. The world outside of his own. Other people, everywhere, were going through exactly what Alice was going through right now. They were being fed and cared for all of their lives for one purpose. They had no freedom, no ability at all to do things they found interesting or to be themselves. They were simply being used.

He stopped by the park and stared out over it. The girls he often saw here with their dog were not there, but there was another group of girls sitting on a hill. One of them was practicing handstands and her friends were chatting amicably while watching her. Will stood watching them, thinking. Could any of these girls end up like Alice? A part of him strongly doubted it, but a steadily growing part of him wasn’t so sure.

He turned away and walked down the sidewalk, hands in his pockets. He hadn’t forgotten his next class, but he did not feel like he was in the mood to study. If Jason had not advised him to stick with his daily routine, he likely would have skipped. Despite his own personal feelings he found himself climbing up to his class and sitting down.

He was too angry to focus this time and had trouble keeping up with the new, more advanced formulas. He had to shake the distractions out of his head as he tried to focus. He was thankful by the time class ended. He left in a hurry, before most of his classmates had even packed their bags.

He found himself heading straight to the apartment. He wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted to ask or what he wanted to accomplish, but he needed to see Alice.

Reiko answered the door again. “Hi Will.” She said. She seemed a little bit more awake today. Will imagined that she had spent quite a lot of time asleep. “Come in.”

“How’s Alice?” Will asked, as they stepped into the kitchen.

“Watching anime.” Reiko said casually, as she got out a box of spaghetti. Will stared at her. “Really.” Reiko cracked the box open. “I needed to find something to keep her distracted for long periods of time, so I got her into streaming. She’s been watching all sorts of things… I thought she would like Star Trek, but she gravitated more towards Naruto, so here we are.”

“She’s watching Naruto?”

“She wanted to, but I thought it was too violent and had her watch My Hero Academia instead.”

“What’s My Hero Academia?”

“It’s a newer show… I like it. It’s cute.”

“Everyone loves anime these days.” Will said, scowling. “People used to make fun of me for watching it.”

“Me too.” Reiko admitted. “Nerds.”

Will laughed. “Bandwagoners, more like.” He said. “I’d love to watch new shows, but I don’t have time…”

“I don’t either.” Reiko confessed, as she poured water into a pot. “I’m surprised at how much I still like it as an adult… It really is just because I don’t have the time.”

“Yeah.” Will said, his voice downcast. He stared down at the table. “Time… We don’t have time.”

“What was that?”

Will looked up at her. “I wish I had more time.” He said. “I feel like we’re not doing enough to help Alice.”

Reiko sighed. “I agree.” She said, her voice gloomy. “But what else can we do? We can’t just put our lives on hold to help her. What good would that do her, or to us?”

Will sat silently, considering her words.

"It's not an easy situation." Reiko continued. "For her, or for us. But we have to push through." She smiled at him. "You're growing up a little, Will." She said. "Remember when you didn't know why Kathy Wong didn't like you making fun of her accent?"

Will groaned. "You're never going to let that one go." He complained. Reiko giggled.

"How could I?" She asked. "But seriously Will… we're doing all we can. And usually, that's enough. Please relax, okay? Alice's in good hands."

Will nodded. "Where is she? Can I see her?"

"In the living room." Reiko said absently, as she turned to focus on her cooking. "Go on ahead. We'll all eat together when dinner is ready, okay?"

Will found this agreeable. He left his bag in the kitchen and set off for the other room. He didn't think to knock on the door: there was never a need to do so. But when he opened the door he wished he had.

Alice let out a surprised scream and leapt backward into an armchair. She pressed herself against it, curling up into a ball as she stared up at him wide eyed.

"I'm sorry." Will said quickly. "Did I startle you?"

She was still staring at him. Loud, audible noises that sounded vaguely look Japanese came from the TV. Will had the distinct impression that barging in on her like this while she was trying to relax might have deeply upset her.

"I'm sorry." Will said quickly, as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The girl stiffened. Will stopped mid-motion in the doorway.

"Are you alright?" He asked, concerned.

She just kept staring at him. Will, not wanting to frighten her, bent down and kneeled on the ground before her.

“What are you watching?” He asked curiously, trying to keep his voice light and friendly. He wondered briefly whether he should reach back and open the door again, but decided against it. She would simply have to get used to people coming through doors.

She refused to answer. She didn’t pull her eyes away from him. It was the exact opposite of what had happened yesterday: she had felt comfortable sitting by him of her own free will, but instantly clammed up when he came over to sit with her. Will wondered whether this was another sign of abuse.

“Reiko’s cooking dinner.” Will said conversationally. “Spaghetti, I think. She likes making this garlic bread to go with it too. I like it a lot.”

She still did not respond.

“I heard you like to cook.” Will said. She gave a small start.

“Who told you that?”

He blinked, completely taken aback that she had spoken, completely out of nowhere. She spoke so infrequently that he almost thought of her as being completely mute. But no, she could speak, and fairly well. She did not stutter or mince her words, at least not today. He understood her meaning perfectly fine, even through her strange, unplaceable accent.

“Jason.” He said. “He was telling me that you know how to cook vegetables.”

She shifted in her place. She seemed to be relaxing somewhat. Her bare feet shifted from behind the seat of the chair to the front, closer to him.

“I do.” She said, sounding somewhat apprehensive and unsure of herself. She spoke as if small talk was a completely foreign thing to her. She said nothing more, but was still looking at him, as if she expected him to respond.

“Which is your favorite?” Will asked conversationally, laying his head on top of his knees, looking up at her.

“My favorite…?” She asked, as if she had never been asked that before.

“Yeah.” Will said. “What vegetable do you like the best?”

“Like the best…?” She repeated, again sounding confused. Will was beginning to wonder whether or not she could even understand what he was talking about. “Carrots.” She said. “I really love carrots.”

“Carrots?” He repeated. He didn’t care for them much himself. He tended to only have them whenever he wanted to mix things up for a vegetable laden meal.

“Is that strange?” She asked quietly.

“No, not at all.” Will said quickly. “No, I just don’t like them myself.”

They fell into an awkward silence. On one hand, she was speaking to him far more than she ever had before. On the other, she still seemed to have that icy cold aura that gave him the impression that he should stop trying to talk to her. If this had been a party or some kind of other social event he almost certainly would have, but the circumstances here were different. He had to help this girl. And if all he could do was keep talking to her, then that was exactly what he was going to do.

“What have you been doing all day?” He asked curiously, deciding to change the subject. Instead of answering she turned back to the TV, and then gave an annoyed little grimace. Will jumped to conclusions.

“Do you not like anime?”

She looked back at him. “I wasn’t paying attention to what was happening.” She admitted. They stared at each other and then Will let out an awkward laugh. Alice did not join in.

“What is so funny?” She asked him warily. “Please don’t laugh…. “

His first instinct was to tease her for not having a sense of humor, but the unique circumstance they were in caused him to have

doubts that it would go well. Instead he decided to explain. “That was a funny thing you just said.”

“How was it funny?” She asked.

“I don’t know.” Will admitted. “It just was.” It certainly was one of those moments that you had to have been there for.

“America is a strange country.” She murmured. “Everyone here is so….” She fell silent and said nothing more.

“You’re just not used to it yet.” Will said. “You haven’t even spent any time outside yet, have you?”

“I have.”

“You have?” Will was surprised. “When?”

“When you carried me.”

Oh.

“Well that doesn’t count.” He said. “You need to walk around and do things you want to do.”

“What I want to do….?” She asked blankly, as if she had no idea what he was talking about. Will suddenly had an idea.

“Yeah!” He said. “We can all go together. “You, Jason, Reiko, and me. The four of us can go do something fun together!”

“Fun…?” She seemed somewhat taken aback by the idea.

“Yeah.” Will said enthusiastically, getting to his feet. “We can go out and do something! Maybe the zoo, or the-“

He jumped as the door behind him opened.

“Dinner’s ready.” Reiko said cheerfully, as she leaned in. “Turn off the TV, Alice. And what are you getting all excited about, Will?”

“We were just talking about how nice it would be to go out and do something together.” Will explained to her.

Reiko’s brow furrowed.

“Like a date?”

“No, of course not.” Will said exasperatedly. “All four of us. Doing something.”

Her eyes flickered to Alice, and she smiled. “I’d love to do that.” She said. “But it may not be a good idea…” She turned her head and covered her mouth so that Alice couldn’t see her lips. “Danger!” She mouthed.

Will understood. “Well, once we have everything figured out we can go.”

“You know, that isn’t a bad idea.” Reiko said, as she looked over at Alice. “We’ve been so worried that we haven’t really thought about the future, have we?”

She stepped back, away from the door. “We’ll talk about it over dinner. Come on.”

Jason was still not back yet. Will was beginning to suspect that their schedule had been greatly disrupted by Alice’s presence. He distinctly remembered often having dinner with them later in the day. This did not seem to upset Reiko at all, though. She was bright and upbeat as she passed around plates and laid out the silverware.

“Oh, this looks good Reiko.” Will said enthusiastically. “Remember when you burnt the bread the first time I was over?”

“That was the toaster, Will.” Reiko said exasperatedly.

“So you say.” Will said, as he handed the plate of bread to Alice, who took it graciously. “But is that the TRUTH?”

“Jason went out and bought a new one that week.”

“A likely story.”

He turned to Alice. “Maybe you could help her cook tomorrow, Alice.”

She let out a surprised squeak and almost dropped the bread she had picked up with her hand. She carefully set it down in front of her without answering.

“Oh, that’s a lovely idea.” Reiko said brightly. “I’ll have to go out and get some vegetables, though… what kind do you like to use in your

cooking, Alice?”

Alice didn’t answer.

“She told me she likes carrots.”

“Carrots, huh…” Reiko said slowly. “Alright. Alice, remind me and I’ll pick some up on my way home tonight.”

“So we’re going to be having your favorite tomorrow, huh Alice?”

Alice said nothing. She stared down at her plate. She looked exceedingly awkward and out of place.

“I’m sure it’s going to be great!” Reiko said cheerfully. “Will, do you know how to cook?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Is there another Will at the table?”

“I do know how to cook!”

“I don’t think you do. I’ve never seen you cook. Which means that you have no right to make fun of me for something my toaster did.”

“I can cook.” Will said defensively. “I just don’t want you over at my house right now. Not while I still have a roommate, anyway.”

“How is Wolf, anyway?”

“The same as ever.” Will said. “Uh, I’m not sure how he’s still going to school here, actually.”

Alice looked up at him. “Wolf?” She asked. “You live with a Wolf?”

Will looked at her, shocked, and then back at Reiko. They burst out laughing, while Alice looked on, confused.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Wolf is a person.” Will explained. “Not an actual wolf.”

She blinked. “You can name your child Wolf in America?”

Reiko and Will laughed even harder.

“It’s just what he likes to call himself, Alice.” Will explained. “He thinks it sounds cool.”

“Cool?”

“He likes how it sounds.” Reiko explained.

“Oh.” Alice said. “I see.” She squinted her eyes and shuffled about in her seat. “Wolf…” She repeated, as if to herself. “Wolf…. Wolf…. Wolf….”

She stopped for a moment, and then opened her eyes again. “It IS cool!”

Will and Reiko laughed even harder.

“I have never seen a wolf.” Alice confessed. “I have only seen pictures.”

“Really?” Will frowned. He looked over at Reiko. “I don’t think I have, either. Have you, Reiko?”

“They don’t keep them in zoos, do they?” Reiko asked. “I… don’t think so? They’re nocturnal, so people don’t normally see them. I’ve never seen an Owl, either.”

“I have.” Alice said.

“Really?” Will asked. “Where?”

Alice seemed startled by the question.

“I… don’t remember!” She said, looking surprised. “I really don’t!”

“Really?” Will asked her.

“Can you remember where you’ve seen every animal you’ve ever seen in your life?” Reiko asked.

“I guess not.” Will admitted grudgingly. “What kind of owl was it, Alice?”

“I’m not sure.” Alice admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d love to see one someday.” Reiko said. “In the wild, preferably. I wonder if there are any hotspots where can you do that.”

“Are there any owls or wolves around here?”

“Owls, surely. They’re everywhere. Wolves, though? I’m not sure.”

The conversation continued like that for quite some time. They ate very infrequently, preferring instead to talk amongst themselves. Alice was beginning to show some signs of interests in specific topics. During his conversations with her Will took notice of the things she would speak up about. Animals and food seemed to be acceptable ways to get her talking. But she never really talked about herself. Will thought it was high time to ask her a more personal question.

"Where did you grow up, Alice?"

Reiko gave him a horrified glance as the fork slipped out of Alice's fingers and into her plate. She raised her hand to her mouth and covered it.

"What is it?" Will asked. "Was it undercooked?"

"Will-"

Will raised his hand and waved it at her, signaling her to be silent. Reiko opened her mouth, as if to argue, but closed it again.

Alice did not move. She stared down at her plate absently.

"Alice." Will said. "Sometimes it's hard to tell people these things. But we're your friends. If we're going to help you, we need to know just who you are."

Alice still did not speak.

"Is there a reason you can't tell us anything?" Will pressed. Reiko sat there frozen, watching them both intently.

Alice lowered her hand. She stared down at the table. Her lips trembled a bit before she spoke.

"I am…." She struggled to find the words. "Not sure where to begin."

"Start with the beginning." Will said. "Where were you born?"

"I do not know." She said, her voice quiet. "I have never known." She looked as if she were about to cry. Will almost found him about to speak, about to comfort her, but the words didn't come out. He

could tell that she was preparing to say more, and he did not want to interrupt her.

“I am from a place that has no language. It belongs to no country. It is a quiet place, ruled by greed and desire.”

Will had no idea what to make of this. Neither did it seem did Reiko.

“No language?” Reiko repeated. “Do you mean that the people don’t speak?”

“No.” Alice said. “The people there speak several languages: Not just one.”

Reiko gave Will a confused look. Will could not blame her. He had no idea what Alice was trying to get at. Plenty of people spoke different languages. Virtually every European student he had ever met seemed to be fluent in at least two.

“Where is it?” Will asked. “Could you point it out on a map?”

“It is not on any maps.”

“Not on any maps?” Will repeated, bemused. He looked at Reiko. “Is that possible?” She was frowning, staring at Alice intently.

“Perhaps a small piece of land.” She said at last. “That is privately owned and not controlled by any nation wouldn’t be present on a world map.” She looked very thoughtful. “I’ll have to research it.” She said. “I’m sure I’ll be able to find it, Alice. If you help me, that is.”

Alice said nothing. Will couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She did not look happy or relieved, or upset or angry. She seemed somehow distant, and neutral.

“This place…” Will said. “Your home. There were other people.”

Alice stiffened.

“What were they like?”

Alice stared downward at the table again. This time, she did not respond.

“Alice.” Will said, his voice urgent. “This is important-“

“That’s enough, Will.”

He looked up at Reiko. Her voice was firm, but not unkind. “We’ve put her through enough today.”

“But Reiko-“

“Please, Will.” She said. “Think about her feelings.”

Will turned to look at her. Alice did not move or even respond. He wasn’t sure that Reiko was right. But he could always come back tomorrow.

“Alright.” He said. “Thank you, Alice. You’ve been a big help.”

He slid out of his chair and got to his feet. He grabbed his bag and turned to face Reiko. “Thank you for dinner.” He said. “But I’ve got to study.”

“Oh.” Reiko said. She looked somewhat upset. “So soon?”

“Yeah, I’ve been putting it off.” Will said. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“You don’t need to be in such a hurry.” Reiko said. “Will-“

“No, I have to be going.” He said quickly. “Thanks for dinner, Reiko. Say hi to Jason for me.” He smiled at Alice. “And I’ll see you later, okay?”

Alice actually smiled back.

Will’s smile dropped as he stepped out of the apartment. He was a little annoyed. Reiko had stopped him from pressing Alice harder during his questioning. She clearly meant well, but she had stopped him just before Alice was about to give up some critical information about herself. She had let her personal feelings get in the way of uncovering the truth. How were they going to protect Alice if they didn’t know what they were going up against?

Will did not go home. He was so angry and so upset that he instead went for a walk, the sun set casting the town into a gorgeous display of colors. The shadow trailing behind him grew longer and longer as he stalked angrily through the streets. This was ridiculous.

He managed to get a hold of him himself as he came to a crossing. He stopped and watched as a police car drove by. It made him think of Officer Stefani and her investigation. He had not heard from her at all since the interview. He wondered what exactly was going on with their investigation. Had they managed to find the man he had seen at the Museum? Would they notify him if they did? He doubted it. That made him feel even more annoyed.

He crossed the street and turned, walking along a different sidewalk than he usually would. He had exhausted nearly all of his usual paths around town, and felt the urge to wander. He was about to turn the corner when suddenly a large black van pulled up right next to him.

He turned and looked up at it. A feeling of unease built up within him as the van came to a stop right next to him.

The back doors of the van popped open and four men stepped out. They stepped onto the concrete one after the other. Dressed in immaculate, expensive looking suits with dark black shoes, they looked quite out of place with the rather drab van they had appeared from.

They turned towards Will and advanced on him. Will turned to face them, his eyes narrowed.

This is it. Will realized suddenly. *This is what I've been waiting for.*

"Can I help you?" Will asked. The four men stopped on the sidewalk next to the road as the van slowly drove off.

"Will Wei?" The man on the center left asked. He was a tall, blonde man who spoke with a dull, monotone voice.

"Yes." Will said. The men surrounding the blonde, who seemed to be the leader, did not respond.

"May we speak to you?"

Will's lip curled. "You already are." He said. "But sure."

The man did not laugh. Will stood there waiting for a response.

“Forgive me.” The man said. “I did not introduce myself. My name is Orion. I am a member of the European Missing Children foundation… Perhaps you have heard of us?”

“I have not.” Will said, surprised.

“I thought not. You are American after all. Our organization is devoted to finding missing and kidnapped children from Europe. We understand that you may have some information for us.”

Europe? One of the very few things they had managed to glean from interrogating Alice was that she had come from somewhere in Europe.

“What do you want me?” Will asked, as he looked in between them. All four of them were gigantic, powerful looking dudes. Something about the way they were looking at him unnerved him. This is who Europeans sent to look for missing children?

“We have received some intelligence that you have been in contact with a missing girl.” Orion said, his voice slow and methodical. “One that was kidnapped from her home and brought here, to this country.”

Will tried to keep his expression surprised. “What?”

“You know where this girl is.” Orion said. “You must tell me.” Something about his tone and the way he was acting bothered Will.

And then Will understood. They were trying to manipulate him into giving up valuable information. These people likely did not have Alice’s best interests at heart.

“I turned her over to the police.” He invented. “They said they would take care of it.”

The man was staring intently at him. Will

“You lie.” The man said. “The police have been nothing but cooperative with us. You know where she is.”

Will narrowed his eyes. He had not told the police about the girl. He had deliberately withheld that information. He was now confident in his suspicions that these people were not who they said they were.

“I don’t!” Will said. “If there’s anything else I can help you with-“

The three men began to walk towards him. Will held up his hands in front of him. “Wait stop-“

Two of the men came forward and grabbed his arms on either side. They were about five inches taller than him and massive. Will stared as the third man approached from the front, his fist raised.

Will brought his arms together and roughly slammed the two men together. They cried out in pain as their heads collided and their grip on him loosened. In two furious blows he had swatted them both aside, sending them sprawling across the pavement head first. The man in the middle stopped. Will could not see his eyes or read his expression, but he was reaching into his pocket.

“Haaaaa!”

Will leapt forward and kicked the man in the stomach. The man bent over in pain, spittle flying out of his mouth as Will brought his leg back and kicked again in the face. The man went flying backward and slammed into the concrete.

Orion stood impassively as the men at his feet scrambled to right themselves. The men who had been slammed together were stumbling, completely dazed. The man he had kicked seemed more coherent. He reached into his pocket and drew a knife.

“Stand down.” Orion commanded. “Not in public.” The man lowered his hand and licked his lips.

It was still quite early: Early enough for there to be witnesses. Will could not see any from where he was standing, but it was very likely that someone had already called the police. If he could keep these people here… they may have some key suspects.

“You’re not really with the police.” Will said, keeping his distance. “You are with the kidnappers, aren’t you?”

Orion stared at him, but said nothing. He reached for his ear and tapped it. His lips moved, but no audible sound came out.

“Who are you, really?” Will asked. “And why do you want the girl?”

Orion bent down and held out an arm to his scrambling comrade. The man took it gratefully, and Orion hoisted him up.

“Answer me!” Will demanded furiously, as he stepped further to the two men.

“I think.” The man said coolly. “That we must be going.”

“I think you’re not going anywhere.” Will said. He reached into his pocket and brought out his phone. He pressed three numbers, in quick succession. 9-1-1

“The police?” Orion said quietly, as the phone began to ring. “I told you, I am with the police.”

“Do the police attack witnesses?” Will shot back.

“Do witnesses usually fight?” He answered. “You are wasting our time, Mr. Wei. Tell me now… where is the girl?”

“The real police.” Will said. “Will never hand her over a kidnap victim to the likes of you.” The girl on the other end of the phone gasped somewhat. A brief hurried voice reassured him that the police would soon be on their way. But Will’s eyes were firmly on Orion. “Until then… you’re not going anywhere.”

Orion stood there, unmoving as Will took another fighting position.

“I’ll keep you here myself if I have to.” He claimed.

Orion looked at him. “You’re a brave boy.” He said at last. “Charming.” The man he was holding on to backed away. The other two men were crawling back towards them, and got back to their feet.

“Stay where you are!” Will snapped. The man almost froze, before Orion’s calm voice followed.

“Stay back.” He said. “I think we’re done here, regardless.”

A pure black van rolled up from behind them. The man turned at the double wide doors on the back burst open.

“Hold it!”

The men, all four of them, suddenly seemed to be moving like lightning. They all made a beeline for the van and climbed inside. The door shut behind them, and they were off.

"Hey!"

Will took off after them. The van began to pick up speed, and despite its size it was already going far faster than he could run. Although he was sprinting, the van seemed unconcerned about passerby and traffic… it kept going and going, passing a stop sign. Furious honks filled the air as the van plowed straight on through. It made the first turn after that crossing, and fell out of sight.

Will slammed his fist against the crossing pole in anger. The people in the car were staring at him, doubtless wondering just what that was all about. He looked across the street in anger at where the car had disappeared, and turned back around.

To his annoyance the police car had arrived. A familiar looking black haired individual had stepped out, looking around curiously. She gave a surprised start as Will approached. He must have looked very sour.

"Oh!" He said. "Officer Stefani!"

"Will Wei?" She repeated blankly. "Were you the one who called-"

"Yeah." He said. "Some guys tried to talk to me about what happened… When I called they raced off."

Stefani turned, and leaned over to the driver side of the car.

"Did you get that!"

The man inside, who Will was quick to notice was not Ratcliffe, nodded and turned the wheel. He was gone in a flash.

"A bunch of people saw it." Will told her. "You'll have plenty of witnesses."

"Why don't we start from the beginning." Stefani suggested. Will immediately began to recount the story of the men. How they had approached him. How they had told him they were part of law enforcement. How he had suspected them of lying when their story

didn't add up. How he had fought them. When he had had finished Stefani was tapping the pencil against her nose thoughtfully. A crowd of people had circled around them, clearly eager to give their own statements.

"Another fight?" She said. "I would advise you against getting into any more. You're going to get into trouble."

"I called 911, but-"

"I understand." Stefani said shortly. "But you must restrain yourself. We have this situation well in hand. We will take care of everything from here, once we find that van."

The police car pulled back up alongside them. The Officer leaned his head out to look at them.

"Nothing."

Will had to keep himself from chortling at Stefani's momentarily stunned expression. She recovered quickly though, almost instantaneously regaining her typical stern expression.

"We're going to have to ask around then." She said. "You." She turned back to Will. "You're free to go for now but if we need anything else-"

"I know." Will said politely. "Thank you, officer. Good luck with your search." He turned and walked away. It was clearly time to go home.

What was that all about? The kidnappers, or someone closely associated with them, had tried to interrogate him. And he had not recognized a single one of them. How many of them were there? And did they really just wander around threatening people in the middle of the day? Granted it was starting to get dark, but still…. there had been witnesses. Did they think they would have a better chance at getting him to talk in broad daylight? He had spoken so professionally. If Will had not been skeptical of them to begin with, he may have given up critical information, such as Alice's Location.

Had he given up Alice's location? He ran through the conversation in his mind. It was still fresh, but he thought he remembered every

detail. He was still thinking about it when he arrived at a coffee shop He stepped inside, took a seat, took out a pen and paper, and scribbled out all he could remember of the conversation. He stared at it, trying to rationalize if it was possible that he had told Orion more than he had meant to. He couldn't decide. He was wasting his time. He crumpled up the paper and threw it aside. He left without ordering anything.

Why had they come to him? Well, that was simple enough. They wanted to know where Alice was. That had been the only question hey had asked. So they didn't know where she was. But they knew HIM. They knew what he looked like and his name and that he had gone to police. What else did they know? Had they been following him? Did they know about Reiko and Jason? If they did, surely it wouldn't be too difficult for them to piece together just where Alice had gone. He went to see them all the time! If they hadn't figured it out already, it was only a matter of time until they-

He was reaching into his pocket and typing out a message to Jason. "Think I'm being followed. Watch out. I'm not coming back over for a while." He almost texted Reiko as well, but he was second guessing himself by now: Should he continue to involve them? Was he putting their lives at risk? Could REIKO be kidnapped next? The thought made him nauseous. He had gotten her involved. If that happened, how could Jason ever forgive him?

He went home. He stepped past Wolf on the couch, who was watching a girl rocking back and forth and moaning on the TV, and went straight to his room. He couldn't work. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't even bring himself to lie on his bed. He felt that the dread welling up within him was completely inescapable.

He ended up sitting down and pressing himself against the door, staring at his room absently. Things looked so different from this angle. The familiar surroundings did nothing to comfort him, or remove his unease. If anything he felt even more trapped.

How had Alice felt during her captivity?

How had she coped?

What had they made her do? What had they done to her?

Will felt a strong lurch in his chest. His eyes felt a little watery. If that had happened to Reiko… how would Jason react?

How would Jason act?

How would Jason act?

And just like that, a clear, distinct memory came to him. A happy memory that had not been quite forgotten, but had been completely lost among all the other events in his life.

He had been sixteen. He had been learning martial arts from Jason for three years. He had become so muscular and good at sports that he suddenly had found himself extremely popular at school. His parents, although unhappy that he was spending so much time around a half Japanese woman, were beginning to tolerate his excursions, as they seemed to be working out. He was getting good grades and would easily be able to get into the college, which had been their plan since he was a kid. Life was good. And it was all because of Jason.

He could not remember the exact context. They had went to Jason's place after training and found Reiko there, asleep at the table. Books had been sprawled out in front of her. They had wanted to clean up after her, but Jason was worried about waking her up, or losing her things. They had no choice but to go back outside.

They had talked a little bit about what Reiko was going through. Her father, a lawyer, was unhappy with their relationship. He had threatened to cut off Reiko financially if she did not leave Jason. They had thought it a bluff and ignored it, but suddenly had found themselves with significantly less income.

"What does it matter?" Will asked. "He'll warm up to you eventually, right?"

Jason leaned out over the side of their apartment. "He's never liked me." He said. "He thinks I'm a bad influence."

"Are you?"

He looked thoughtful. "Honestly?" He said. "I think she's been more of a good influence on me." He shifted about in place to better face Will. "I changed completely when I met her."

They had already been together when Will and Jason had met. "What were you like before?"

"Before?" Jason murmured. "Everything I did was for myself." He turned away again and placed his hand on the rail. "But now? It's for us."

Will had laughed. Jason grinned at him.

"Someday, it'll happen to you." He warned. Will found himself interested in changing the subject.

"How are you going to pay for school? Or the Dojo?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't you worried?"

"Of course I'm worried." Jason said. "We could lose everything because of this. My business. Her studies and career. Our home."

He smiled.

"But we've been through worse." He said. "The important thing is to not forget what's important. What we're doing this for."

Will snapped back to reality with a snap. He stood up and made his way over to the computer. No, he couldn't dwell on the past. He couldn't dwell on what could or would go wrong. He couldn't endlessly speculate on the actions of people he really knew nothing about. But what he could do was keep moving forward.

What could he do next? What could he do now? He reached for his phone and unlocked it. Jason had still not responded, but Will ignored that and began to sift through his phone. What could he do now?

He found Lysa's twitter and clicked on it and scrolled through her feed. There was a smattering of stuff in there, some posts about her

personal life, more than a few posts about the government, but she had also been true to her word. She had made a number of tweets about the situation with Alice. There weren't a whole lot of likes or retweets, and Will was a little disappointed to see that she had not yet written a follow up article. Nevertheless, he liked and retweeted all of the Alice related posts and stood there staring at the screen. There weren't a whole lot of likes or retweets, especially compared to some of the political posts. But still, there were people other than him who were reading her words, and maybe were starting to care.

She had quite a following, larger than his for sure. It was a start. In fact…

He switched over to his messages and texted her. "*Saw some of your tweets. Good work. I had a run in with the kidnappers today. I need to talk to you about it."* He sent the message and turned to lie down in bed. It wasn't a lot, but it was a first step.

He was surprised when his phone, almost immediately, started buzzing. He frowned, rolling over to grab it again. His first thought was that Jason had finally gotten back to him, but instead it was a response from Lysa.

"I don't want to hear it."

What was that supposed to mean? He recalled how she had acted last time they had met… how moody and aggressive she had been when arranging the meeting, and then how normal and supportive she had been when they actually met in person. Rather than asking what was wrong, Will thought it would be best to ask if he could see her tomorrow.

She responded almost immediately. *"How dare you? I'm very busy and don't have time."*

And then she sent a follow up text.

"We can meet over lunch."

Will found that perfectly reasonable, and the two settled on a location that neither had been to before- a seafood restaurant. By

the time Will set the phone back down he was thinking about what he wanted to order. Fish sounded really, really good.

It dawned on him how much better he was feeling. How much more optimistic. He fell asleep in a good mood.

When he awoke he gathered his things and headed off to class. He had gotten up a little early today, and found himself walking to class rather than taking the bus. He was once again having trouble focusing on his classwork: He was trying to remember if he had any assignments due today.

Thankfully, he did not. Although a rather lengthy essay was assigned, nothing needed to be turned in today. He jotted down the assignment and stared at it. He would have to finish it at Jason's apartment.

Wait a minute. He couldn't go back there. He'd have to go home. But he didn't like working at home, because Wolf was always there, and he was always making noise. And he had already arranged to meet Lysa for lunch…

Well, maybe he could get a head start on it before she showed up. He thought absentmindedly, as he made his way to the restaurant. He could at least outline it and establish a general idea of what he wanted to do. He had barely managed to think of a topic when several light footsteps ran up to him.

"Hey you!" It was Lysa. Today she was wearing a rather garish bright red beret, jacket, pants and boots. Her glasses too had a slight red tinge to them. Although the shape was fairly similar, Will was certain that these were a different pair than the ones he had seen her with before.

"Hey." He said. "What are you wearing?" It was meant as an innocuous question. Lysa's face contorted from pleasant to nasty in a flash.

"Excuse me?"

"I can't remember the last time I saw someone dress all in one color." Will told her. She smiled at him. She went from pleasant to

angry to back again in a matter of moments.

“Ooooh, you like it?”

Will thought it made her look stupid, but he thought it was best to be polite. “Yeah, I do.”

She giggled. “Well, thank you.” She said. “Well then. Shall we begin?”

They stepped inside the restaurant together. Will found himself staring around the room. It was quite crowded and bustling with people. It was a busy time of day for them. He had hoped for something a little quieter. Lysa, however, seemed perfectly comfortable.

“How have you been holding up?” Will asked her, as the waitress led them to a table in the back.

“Me?” Lysa said. “AWFUL. God, I can’t even begin to describe it…”

The waitress sat them at their table, handed them their menus, and started off. She shot a curious look behind her as she did so. Will imagined they must look like an odd pair.

“Why don’t you try?” Will suggested, as he began to peruse the menu. Lysa laughed.

“I’ll give it a shot.” She said. “Okay, other than my… crippling depression, anxiety issues, relationship problems, financial problems, parental problems, political problems…. I’m not having a good time getting this story out there.”

“What do you mean?”

She suddenly looked very furious, although this time not at him. “They don’t care!” She shouted. The people dining around them turned to look at them, shocked. Will felt a strong sense of embarrassment well up within him.

“I’ve told them.” She went on. “That I met you, that we talked, that you think there’s more to this story, that I wanted to cover it further…” She slammed her hand against the table so hard that the entire thing shook. “Nope. Don’t cover it. The story is done.”

“You’ve been tweeting about it though.”

“I have.” She said, nodding furiously. “But I don’t have a STORY. And without a STORY, I have no news. You understand? I can’t publish about something with no real concrete facts. As to what happened, who was involved, and so on…”

“I understand.” Will said quickly. “You want information?”

“I want a story.” She repeated. “I need some kind of major event. Something people will be talking about.”

“That’s why I called you here.” And in a flash Will was recounting the story. Of how the men had come at him. How they had tried to get him to divulge information. How he had fought them off. And how the police had not been able to find any sign of them.

When he had finished Lysa was tapping her nose thoughtfully.

“That’s really interesting.” She said. “I had heard rumors. I didn’t know you were involved, though.”

“Do you know anything more about it?” Will asked anxiously. Lysa shook her head.

“No.” She said. “The police just said that it was under investigation and that they wanted the owners to come in for questioning.”

“The police?” Will repeated. “You spoke with the police?”

“Of course.” Lysa said, surprised. “Or, at least… uh, we speak to their spokesperson. I think he’s a cop? Anyway.” She said, changing the subject. “If I recall correctly the girl came out from a black van. Was it the same one?”

“I think so.” Will said. “But I couldn’t say for sure.”

Her lips twitched. “Did you think to look for a license plate?”

The first time he had not: He had not expected to see the van again. The second time however, he had caught a glimpse of it as the van sped away.

“I can’t recall the number.” He said. “Sorry.”

“That’s fine.” She said. “How many black vans full of goons can possibly be around here?” She frowned. “Did you recognize any of the men?”

He had not.

“But you recognized the man at the museum.” She said. She pulled a pen and paper out of her jacket pocket and began scribbling on the table. “There were three the first time, and four the second… we’re dealing with at least seven perpetrators here.”

Seven seemed quite a lot. But still, Will found himself feeling uneasy.

“Surely they have a leader?” He asked. “Surely they’re taking orders from someone?”

She looked up at him. “You think there are more?”

“There has to be.” Will said. “I mean… these are just delivery people, right? Where was she being taken?”

“She was leaving the Asian Culture building.” Lysa recalled, tapping her pen against the table. “In the van, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Then that means-“

“Are you ready to order?”

Both of them jumped and looked guiltily at the waitress. It seemed as if she had been standing there quite a while. They quickly gave their orders and returned to the conversation.

“Then that means she came from the cultural center.” Lysa said.

“Don’t be stupid.” Will said. “She can’t have been living in the cultural center…”

Lysa huffed. ‘Don’t call me stupid!” She snapped. Will, however, ignored her and continued his thought.

“That just begs the question as to why she was brought there, and where they were sending her to.” He continued. “I mean, what was the point? She couldn’t have been there long, right?”

“Have you tried asking her?”

Will frowned. “She won’t answer a lot of personal questions. I could try, but…”

“Why don’t I try and meet her?” Lysa suggested. “Maybe another woman could get through to her.”

“We’ve already tried that.” Will said. “No dice. She’s getting better though.”

“That’s good.” Lysa said airily. “You’re taking good care of her?” Will smiled wryly.

“As best as I can.”

“That’s good.” Lysa said again. “But really, Will… if I could just MEET her, maybe that could-“

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Will said. “She’s distressed, she’s in no state to talk to strangers. And besides… after what happened, I’m not sure I should be around her. If they’re following me now, I don’t want to lead them to her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.” Will admitted. “It’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

Lysa suddenly looked very down. “I’m not sure what I can do.” She said. “I’d love to tell you that these people are going down, but… Will, we live in a patriarchal society. The patriarchy wouldn’t allow their own to go down without a fight.”

Will couldn’t bring it in him to agree, because this kind of talk always led him to having a bad taste in his mouth. “Do you think the school is in on it?”

“They have to be, to an extent.” She said. “I’ve been asking around. That garage? It’s supposed to be reserved for transporting cultural artifacts and stuff. It’s not open to the public.”

Will recalled that Reiko had said something similar. “Yeah.”

“So that means they have SOMETHING to do with the school.” Lysa said. “And they have a certain amount of control over the faculty, or

maybe just that specific building."

"I chased that man in there." Will recalled. "What was he doing there? Was he hanging around because of what happened, or did he have other reasons?"

"Have you seen him since?"

"I was told not to go back." Will said. Lysa gave him a look.

"And here I thought you were brave." She said. "Listen. Sometimes if you really want something you have to go out and reach for it. You want to know more about these people, right? Going back is the only way."

She grinned.

"I can go with you and maybe get a picture of him. If I could do that, I could identify him."

He stared at her. "You serious?"

"Dead serious." She said. "If you could point him out for me, I could have my people identify him. And we can go from there."

Will was starting to get excited. "If that's true, we could blow this thing wide open!"

Her grin seemed to widen. "I know, right?" She said. "Do you have the balls for it?"

Will's smile faded. "They won't be happy to see me back there again." He said. His thoughts were more on Jason and Reiko rather than the museum staff themselves, many of whom had not even seen them.

"History seldom remembers well behaved women." She said. "And I suppose the same can be said for men." She turned her head and saw their waitress coming at them with their food. "And now we eat."

The food was delicious: Will and Lysa found themselves momentarily distracted by comparing their dishes. Lysa had ordered a rather expensive looking dish with shrimp and crab, while Will had ordered

some fish and fries. Both of them were very happy with their meal, although Will noticed that Lysa did not eat everything on her plate.

“So what do you say?” Lysa asked. “We go tomorrow?”

“If I have a chance to.” Will said. “I have classes, and I’m starting to fall behind with everything that’s happened.”

Lysa waved her hand dismissively. “You’ll be fine.” She said. “I’ll look after you. Look, I’m just asking you to point the guy out for me. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. Then you can go home and leave the rest to me, okay?”

“What ae you going to do?”

“Once we identify this guy.” She said. “It’ll be a simple matter of digging up his past, his connections, his history… the things he may not want the public to know about. And once exposed as a human trafficker, the people around him will be suspect as well.”

She made it sound so easy. She spoke with such confidence and earnestness. There was nothing but complete conviction in her. She was ready and willing to do it. But she needed him.

“I’ll do it.” He said. “No… we’ll do it.”

She grinned at him. “Excellent.” She said. “I will see you tomorrow. Should we meet there?”

“We’ll walk there together.” Will said. “It’s possible he may not be in the building itself.”

“Oooh, good idea.” She said. “I’ll see you then.” And before Will could stop her, she stood up and walked away.

“Hey, wait-“

He almost stood up, but their waitress noticed him and hurried over.

“Oh, are you finished?” She said brightly. “Let me get your bill.”

Will sat back down, stony faced, as the girl went to fetch the bill. When she brought it back he couldn’t even look at it right away. When he finally did he blanched.

Paying for the bill was one of the most painful things he had done in college. By the time he stepped out of the restaurant he was fuming: Her meal was twice as expensive as his had been, AND he had to tip. The only thing that kept him from texting Lysa right now and demanding that she pay was the worry that she might get upset and abandon their plans. She didn't HAVE to help… whatever her personality flaws, she had, at least, been interested in helping Alice. And in the end that was all that mattered.

But still, he didn't want her to walk all over him.

"Hey, you forgot to pay your pill. You owe me $42."

Satisfied, he pocketed the phone and stared up at the buildings around him, contemplating. His next class would be soon. If he got there early, maybe he could get started on that essay. He set off down the road, his mind drifting back to schoolwork. He needed to get that essay done, as soon as possible. Could he do it today? Since he had plans tomorrow, he might as well…

Will began to plan out ideas for a topic, a theme for the essay. If he disagreed so strongly with the Professor about her stances on history, maybe he could begin with that. He began to think of the topics they covered. The slave trade that he had discussed with Alice immediately sprang to mind. He recalled how fascinated she had been by the concept of transporting goods across the ocean. He had described it in a completely different way than the professor had to him.

Perhaps he could focus on the more inane, everyday nature of international trading. What objects were most desirable? What was considered valuable today? Was any of it still precious by modern standards?

He began to puzzle it out as he walked. What did he find so interesting about this? What had Alice found so interesting about it?

He turned onto the road to his building and climbed up the stairs He passed by a group of people gossiping happily under the alcove of the building and stepped inside. More people were scattered here,

sitting on chairs and playing with their phones. Will stepped past them and up the stairs.

He was so early that no one else was in. He took a seat, grabbed his laptop, and slowly began to work. He had settled on discussing the monetary value of slaves: how they were captured, priced, and sold. He also focused on discussing the owners of the slaves, and their interactions between one another.

He had gotten a clear outline of what he wanted to talk about in the paper by the time other people began to filter in, and he unfortunately began to lose track of his thoughts. The buzzing of conversation around him about everything other than schoolwork was overwhelming. In the end he had no choice but to shut the book and wait for class to begin.

It went well, as usual. Will however found himself a little irritated when more work was assigned at the end of class, and that they were reminded that a major test would be coming up soon. He already knew that he wouldn't be able to do it tomorrow, due to his plans with Lysa. Maybe after he got home? But when would that be?

He was already so busy, and yet more and more things were piling up. He was beginning to feel a little bit overwhelmed, and lost. All of this was completely breaking his schedule, and if he didn't adhere to the schedule… best not to think about that.

He had a faint image of himself trying to study for an exam while sitting through a lecture from another class. He shuddered.

He'd better finish that essay now, before anything else could go wrong. He rarely went home this early, but maybe it would be for the best to do so today. He left the building, climbed down the stairs, and headed straight home. He saw no one he knew during his return trip.

"Hey."

Will stopped and turned. Standing there, leaning up against the crossing light just before his house, was Jason.

"Oh hey!" Will said, surprised. "What are you-"

“I just came to talk.” He said. “About that message?”

“Yeah?” Will had almost thought that Jason had somehow not read it. It wasn’t like him to not respond.

“You really think you’re being followed?”

“Yeah.” Will said. “By the trafficking organization.”

Jason nodded. “Well, it’s probably a good idea to stay away from us for now.” He said. “I haven’t noticed anything strange, and neither has Reiko. We’ll take care of her. You just focus on keeping yourself safe, alright?”

And without another word, he walked away. Will looked after him, wanting to call and ask for more advice, but stopped. He couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t being watched now. It wouldn’t do to draw more attention to Jason. The kidnappers must not know about him yet. For now he would need to keep his distance.

He turned around and walked away, as if Jason was a complete stranger to him. It felt a little sad. Will had to remind himself that it was only for a short while. Once the situation was resolved, things would go back to normal.

He walked up to his front porch and stepped inside. Wolf was asleep on the couch again. The giant half eaten tub of popcorn had spilled out all over the cushions and floor. Will suddenly realized that he had not sat down on that couch at all this semester.

He turned to his room and entered, shutting the door behind him. He pulled out the chair for his desk and sat down, and grabbed his computer. It was time to get to work.

He sat there for a couple of hours researching, drafting, and editing his paper. He stopped and checked the clock. It was still too early to go to bed, but he felt unable to continue. It was time to take a break. He would finish tomorrow night.

He stood up and stretched and walked around the room for a bit. It was still light out. He felt the urge to go out and do something

before it got dark. He exited the room and saw Wolf rummaging through the fridge.

"We need some more food." Wolf complained to him. "There's nothing here but vegetables."

Will almost lost his temper with him, but restrained himself as he headed out the door. It was a cool night. He was going to need to start wearing thicker clothes when leaving the house. He hoped they could find a proper home for Alice before that time. Reiko's clothes wouldn't fit her, and it would be a nightmare picking out an entire wardrobe for her. No, Alice would need to find a proper home before winter set in.

He wondered where she would go after all was said and done. Whether she would be happy. Whether they would even see each other again. It was a strange thought, to think so far ahead in the future when he had no idea what he wanted to do in the here and now. But that was what they wanted, wasn't it? For her to move on with her life, and be safe and happy. With no chance of being dragged back into whatever hole she crawled out of.

Will continued to walk, thinking of her. The pain she was clearly in. The struggle he, Jason, and Reiko had faced to try and take care of her. Her uncertain future. It somehow made him feel a little sick. What would have happened if he hadn't found her? Where would she be now?

He closed his eyes, imagining it. She had been tied up in the back of that van for who knows how long, being taken to who knows where. The strange men had tried to recapture her once she made a bid for freedom, and were still trying to figure out her exact location.

Why? What purpose did it serve? What were they hoping to accomplish? Didn't they think it a huge risk, to actively search for the girl? Couldn't they just find another one? There were plenty of girls around here. What made Alice so special? She was shipped here, they knew that. Did they want her specifically? Why? Was there a reason? Or was he overthinking it? Overthinking everything?

The sun was beginning to set. Will found himself wanting to go home. He recalled how they had come after him last time, around this time of day, and decided it would be best to get off the streets before dark. And so he went.

By the time he lay down in bed, he was busy thinking about his next move. Tomorrow he and Lysa would be taking on the Culture Center again, in search of the man he had recognized. They needed a photograph, a name, something they could use so that Lysa could learn more about him. Once that happened… everything else should fall into place.

And then it would all be over. He smiled to himself at the thought as he drifted off to sleep. He couldn't wait to put all of this behind him.

He woke up the next day to find a text from Lysa. "*Don't keep a girl waiting*!"

Will groaned as he rolled out of bed and jumped around, trying to get himself prepared for the day. They had agreed to meet the next day, but hadn't set a location or time. "*When and where*?"

He got his response immediately. "*Coffee, dumbass. Now*."

He rolled his eyes as he undressed and got into the shower. He was out and ready to go in a little under ten minutes. Wolf was on the couch again, staring at the TV with a vacant expression on his face. Will stepped past him and out into the street. He stared around the neighborhood, half expecting to see a black van jettison away, but there was nothing. Satisfied that all was well, he took off down the street and headed to the same coffee shop that he had met Lysa in.

She was sitting by herself again when he came in.

"There you are!" She said, as he said down. "You look dreadful. Did you just wake up?"

Will thought it best to be honest. "Yeah."

"Well we have a busy day ahead today." She said pompously, as she perused her notes. "Look, I don't have the time or the energy to be running around the Culture center all day-"

Will opened his mouth to respond, but she kept on talking. “So I got a hold of their work schedules.” She said. “I wanted to see when a good time for us to go would be. As it so happens, people who work the later shift… that is, three to eleven… do work those hours every day. So it’s safe to say that our guy will be there around that time.”

“Cool.” Will said. “So we should go at three?”

“Well, I have another interview coming up.” She said. “I was thinking around four, fivish….”

“That’s fine.” Will said, recalling that he had seen the man around that time. “If he is an employee, he should be working those hours.”

“So we’ll meet back here at four-thirty, then.” Lysa said. She stood up and pocketed her phone. She was so short that she wasn’t much taller than Will in his sitting position.

“Three?” Will said. “Sounds good. Oh, and by the way… you forget to pay your-“

“Ooooh, I’ve got to be going!” Lysa said quickly. “I forgot… This cute girl wanted to hang out and get ice cream.” And she bustled off. Will watched her go, bemused, and immediately whipped out his phone.

“*You didn’t pay for your meal*.”

He yawned and set the phone down. He had a whole day ahead of him. How was he going to spend the next several hours? He would love to go to the dojo, but after Jason had warned him to stay away that felt like kind of a misstep. And maybe working out just before a major investigation like this one wasn’t the best idea. It looked like he was going to spend his entire day studying.

He stood up and made his way out of the coffee.

“Hey you!”

Will stopped mid step and turned around. A familiar looking dark haired young man was coming towards him. Will at first wildly thought it must be one of the kidnappers, but as he got closer he realized who it was.

“Oh.” Will said. “Damon, right?”

The boy who had followed he and Lysa home was glowering at him. Will stared back blankly. He had no idea what could have made him so upset.

"Uh, can I help you?"

Damon's eyes almost seemed to soften a little bit, but he still took an aggressive step towards him. Will almost felt himself get into a fighting position. His behavior was a little threatening.

"I thought I warned you to stay away from her?" Damon said coldly. Will stared at him.

"Lysa?" He repeated blankly. "I mean…. Yeah, you did, but I didn't have to listen…"

"You should have." Damon said. "You should have." He took another step forward and clapped his hand on his shoulder. Will almost threw it off out of pure instinct, but it was meant to be a friendly gesture.

"Hey man." Damon said, as he pulled him away from the other people in the room to a dark corner. "Let me show you something, alright?"

Will reluctantly stood there as Damon pulled out an old cracked iPhone and held it out for him to see.

"Look at this." Damon said, as he thrust the screen under Will's nose. Will, who always took very good care of his phones, was a little bemused at the cracks running all over the screen. It was quite an old model, and hadn't been taken very good care of.

Will focused his eyes to see past the numerous cracks to see the photo underneath. It seemed to be an image of a headline in an online article or blog post.

The Headline Read:

HOW COLLEGE BOYS ENABLE RAPE CULTURE

Will turned to look up at him, bemused. "So?"

"Look at who wrote it!" Damon hissed, thrusting the phone further under his nose. Will complied. It was written by Lysa Sanders.

Will turned up to look at him again. “So?”

“So?” Damon hissed. He shook his head. “Look.” He said. “She used me in this article. She picked me out from the crowd, started talking to me, and used me as an example. I almost got expelled because of that article.”

“What?”

“If you mess around with her.” Damon said. “She’s going to fuck you up.”

Will stared down at the screen, thinking. He wasn’t entirely sure he believed Damon’s story. And besides, the reason he had started talking to Lysa was to ruin lives of people who deserved it. If anything this did nothing but reassure him that she knew what she was talking about when it came to making these kinds of issues public.

“Thanks.” Will said, as he pushed the phone away from him. “But I trust her.” Damon stared at him as he turned and walked away.

“You’re going to regret this!” Damon called after him. Will ignored him as he exited the coffee shop and stepped onto the pavement. He wondered if Damon often just hung around the place hoping Lysa would show up. Did he ever confront her to her face? Somehow he doubted it. There had to be more to the story. If he kept popping up he was going to have to speak to Lysa about it. Maybe he too had been given an expensive restaurant bill…

Will returned home and spent the day lounging around his room, occasionally picking up a book and perusing through it or working on his essay. He was somewhat unfocused: He worked for about fifteen minutes at a time before getting bored and wanting to do something else. He felt twitchy and on edge. He was glad that he hadn’t gone to bed like this: He felt as if it wouldn’t be possible to sleep.

He sat around a lot, got up a lot, paced around his room a lot, worked a lot. It was mind numbing. He wondered how Wolf managed every day. Perhaps he didn’t. Perhaps that was why he always seemed so upset and bored.

Will managed to finish the essay and had begun working on his formulas when his phone began to rumble. He checked it, half expecting it to be from Lysa, but was surprised to see that it was from Reiko.

“She misses you.” Followed by a little frowny face. Will laughed, in spite of himself, and flipped the phone over without responding.

And then, at long last, it was time. Will shut the book, gave one last glance at the clock, and stood up. It was time to go.

“Ready?” He texted to Lysa, and set out. He had barely gotten down the street when his phone buzzed.

“OMG leave me alone! I’m not interested!”

Will stared at the message blankly. And before he could think it through to rationalize this out of nowhere response, he got another message:

“Sorry wrong guy. Ret 2 go.”

Will stared at it even longer, somehow even more confused, before pocketing the phone and headed ff to the coffee shop.

Lysa was waiting there again. She looked somehow frazzled and annoyed.

“What happened to you?” Will asked. She looked up at him and scowled.

“None of your business!” She snapped. “Now it’s your turn.” She fumbled with her bag and a number of pencils dropped out. Will bent over to help her pick them up. “Thank you.” She said stiffly, as he handed them back to her.

“Anyway.” Lysa said, seemingly trying to compose herself. “I’m ready to leave now.”

“You sure?” Will asked. “We could take a couple of minutes if you want.”

“No, no, I need to get this done.” She said. “Ugh, I can’t believe this…” She yawned. “Blah.”

Will gave her a weird look. “Are you sure you’re alright?” He asked her.

“Of course!” She snapped, as she pressed the pens back into her bag. “I’m just… a little upset, that’s all.” She did seem slightly more irritable than she had been that morning. Will surmised that she had been doing things all day and had worn herself out.

“Maybe she some coffee would help.” Will suggested.

“Ooooh, good idea.” She said, beaming. “Thanks for offering.” She smiled radiantly at him.

“I’m not going to buy for you.” Will said, without thinking. The smile disappeared immediately from her face.

“Why not?”

“Why would I?” Will countered. His annoyance at her skipping away from the bill came back to the forefront. She looked at him, surprised. Clearly no one had ever spoken to her like that before. “Buy your own coffee.”

She tightened her lips and looked away from him. “Minimum wage is too low in this country.” She said snobbishly.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Will asked, exasperated.

“I can’t just PAY for my own coffee.” She explained. “I’ll go over budget…”

Will crossed his arms. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am!” She insisted, becoming increasingly upset. “What, you don’t believe me?”

“No.” Will said bluntly. “I don’t.”

She fell very quiet. She looked very small and weak. When she spoke again it was in a softer tone. “I thought we were friends.”

Will stared at her, aghast. “What?”

“I thought you would be willing to help me.” She said, her voice becoming increasingly frantic. “I thought you would be there for me.”

“What are you talking about?” Will demanded. Apparently the people around them were beginning to turn their heads and look at them due to the noise she was making. She was going to make a scene.

“I don’t understand why you’re… why all of you are so MEAN!” She blurted out at him. She looked as if she would break out into tears.

“Mean?” Will repeated. “People don’t have to buy you things-“

“You’re so mean!” She shouted at him. Will was keenly aware that people were staring at them now. Will felt a strong sense of embarrassment, but was willing to back down or ague further.

He stood up, and without another word walked away from her. She let out a surprised gasp as he pushed the door open and stepped outside.

What a complete waste of time. He thought to himself, frustrated. Did he really think this was going to work? How would this ever help Alice? … and he probably wasn’t even going to get his money back. He had put up with all of these verbal abuse and exploitation just for it to end up with nothing. It was the closest thing to a bad break up he had ever had.

What a disappointment. He thought to himself bitterly as he stepped away from the coffee shop, with no direction in mind. And what a ridiculous person…

“Wait!”

He stopped. He turned around to see a pair of tiny legs scuttling towards him. Lysa stopped some distance away. Her tiny hand was reaching out towards him.

“Hey… Ummm… Will.” She said. She looked somehow awkward and reluctant. “Look.” She said. “If you didn’t want to pay for my coffee, you could have just said so-“

Will was about to give her an angry retort, but she continued speaking.

“But we can’t let that get in the way of what we’re trying to do.” She said. “There’s a story out there about a girl being abused and… I..

.want to cover it. I want to help her, and I think you do too."

She tried to smile at him. It looked somewhat forced, like she was afraid that he would start shouting again. "You can buy me a coffee after we're done… okay?"

Will stared at her. He wasn't sure what to think.

But she was right. Whatever problems they may have had together, they were all that they had. They needed to stick together if they wanted to get this done. For Alice's sake… he needed to do it.

He nodded at her and turned back around. "Alright." He said. "Ready to go?"

"Yes!" She chirped, with no sign of her initial worry and anger as she trotted after him. She was so short that had to take several steps to match his. "To the culture center!" She pumped her fist forward energetically.

Will wondered whether he should warn her that he might be being followed, but decided against it. They wanted to keep as many people out of the situation as possible. For all the kidnappers knew they were just taking a walk together.

"Lysa." He said. "Are you sure you want to come with me? I could probably just go by myself and take a photo."

She turned to him; her eyes narrowed. "With what?" She asked. "My camera? No thanks."

"My phone?" Will suggested. Lysa laughed.

"You're an amateur." She said. "You wouldn't know how to take a good shot. I just need you to point him out, and I'll handle the rest."

Will found himself wondering how any one person could be so condescending and obnoxious. He wondered what her parents thought of her.

"What are we going to do when we do find him?" Will asked. "We probably shouldn't confront him again."

“I just need a photo.” Lysa told him. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a rather expensive little camera. “Once we have that we’ll bounce, okay?”

“We’ll bounce.” Will agreed. He wondered where she was from. He had never heard anyone use the word ‘bounce’ in that context in his life.

As they had discussed previously, they walked around a little bit before heading to the cultural center. They tried to make small talk, but it was awkward. They found that they had very little in common. Lysa, who proclaimed herself to be a pacifist, had nothing but disdain for martial arts.

“Why would you WANT to learn how to fight people?”

“Because I want to.”

“But WHY?” She stressed. “I mean, what’s the point? What good does it do anyone?”

“It keeps me active.”

“There are better forms of exercise.” She insisted. “Like Crossfit.”

He decided to try another tactic. “It helped me save that girl.”

She gave him an angry look. “Are you trying to justify your violent disposition?”

He had to give up. No matter what he said, she always tried to spin it around to her own weird, displaced worldview that seemed to have come straight from University Lectures. Or, perhaps more accurately, were sick parodies of them. She spoke at length of topics that she had seemed to have mangled or misinterpreted. For example, they passed by the tennis courts and they had a brief conversation about sports. Lysa had commented how female tennis players made significantly less than male ones. Will had pointed out how female sports tended to attract less spectators and therefore generate less revenue, and she had gotten snippy with him. It was impossible to hold a conversation with her: the only reason he was bothering at all was for Alice’s sake.

That seemed to be the only thing they had in common, really. They were both disgusted by what had happened to her. It was what had drawn them together, after all.

“Lysa.”

She looked up at him. “Yes?”

“Ready to go?”

Her seemingly happy go lucky expression became somber. She laughed nervously.

“Uh, I….” she swallowed. “Yes!”

Will smiled at her. “Look. If you really don’t want to go-“

“I do!” She said firmly. “I’m not… I’m not letting this chance pass me be!” She looked really determined. Will found himself smiling at her.

“Lysa.” He said. “Thank you.”

She blushed.

They steered towards the building and stared looking up at it. Despite her words Lysa looked exceedingly nervous. She was fingering the camera in her grasp, as if worried it would fly away from her and escape.

“Lysa.” He said. “Stay close to me, alright? There’s no telling what’s going to happen in there.”

“I don’t need your protection!” She snapped. Will turned back around to the building.

“I was touring the building when I saw him.” He said. “He has to be an ordinary employee, right?”

“I hope so.” Lysa said. “I hope this isn’t a complete waste of time.”

They stepped up to the building and entered. The same girl at the front desk gave them a curious look. Will suspected that she recognized him. She said nothing to them however as they passed by to the exhibits.

“Should we just go find him?”

“Let’s look around a bit more-“

“Excuse me.”

Will found himself feeling a strong sense of déjà vu. A familiar tall, lanky man was walking towards him. Will narrowed his eyes. It was that man, Diamond. The one who had stopped him while he was with Reiko. Lysa shot him an inquisitive look as the man stopped in front of them.

“I am going to have to ask you to leave.” The man said. “After what happened last time.”

“Who are you?” Lysa asked rudely, pushing herself in front of him. Diamond stared down at her through his glasses.

“Another girl?” He repeated. His gaze suddenly seemed to harden. “My my… you certainly do enjoy coming here for your dates, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.” Will said coldly. “It’s a beautiful exhibit.” Lysa let out a surprised gasp and whirled around, as if to reprimand him, but Diamond interrupted her.

“Be that as it may.” He said. “I cannot have you destroying more of this exhibit. I must ask you to leave. If I had had my way you would have been arrested.”

Will frowned at him. “I wasn’t responsible for the destruction of your-“

“I have witnesses.” Diamond said. “Leave. Now.”

“Now wait just a minute.” Lysa said, stepping between them. She seemed to have taken an even more intense dislike to Diamond than she had to Will. She stepped forward much more aggressively than she ever had with Will. “You can’t just BAN him for-“

“Young lady.” He said. “I will do as I must.”

Will thought it best to follow direction. “Lysa.” He said. “We’re not-“

He stopped. There, just behind Diamond, was the man. He stopped and stared at them. Will raised his hand and pointed.

“That’s him.”

Lysa stared at him, surprised, before turning to where he had pointed and raising her camera. Before she could, however, Diamond raised a hand and smacked her camera away. She cried out as she dropped the camera, staggering, as the man she had just tried to photograph turned, caught sight of them, and immediately broke out into a sprint.

“No!”

“No PICTURES!” Diamond shouted “SECURITY!”

Will ignored him. His eyes were on the rapidly dropping camera. He darted downward with both hands and grasped it. He raised it to his face, pointed it to his target, and snapped a picture.

Diamond was reaching for the camera. Will backed away.

“Lysa!” He called. “We’re good to go-“

He turned around. Security guards were making their way to their position. Will lowered the camera as he backed away to the door. Lysa, looking rather frightened, did not move.

“The camera.” Diamond said coldly. “Take it from him!”

“You can’t do that.” Will said. “I’m leaving.”

The guards closed in on him. Will had no choice he ducked past them and swiftly maneuvered to the front of the room. Diamond let out a frustrated yell for them to draw weapons. They hesitated. Will turned and bolted. He wasn’t willing to hit them.

“I’m leaving!” Will cried out. “Come on!”

The men seemed unwilling to come after him as he made his way to the front door. Lysa was still standing by Diamond, looking a little shocked.

“Come on!” HE called to her, gesturing her to follow him. She did as she was told. Diamond, however, reached out a hand and grabbed her arm. She cried out.

“The camera!” He said, holding out his hand to him. Will started forward, but the guards stepped forward in between them. They seemed unwilling to draw their guns, but they certainly seemed intent on getting him to leave the premises.

“I go.” He said coldly. “When she does.”

He pushed past them, and a man tried to grab his arm. He brought his elbow down into the guard’s stomach and he keeled over. He brought his fist upward and slammed it into his chin, causing him to fall back. The other two guards jumped at him, trying to restrain him, but he twisted. The men, underestimating the strength in his arms, were thrown to the ground in short order.

Will ignored the screams around him as he advanced towards Diamond. Diamond had taken several steps backward. Although a skinny man, he was still too strong for Lysa to get away from him. She was struggling vainly, trying to pull her wrist away from him. She looked positively fearful.

“Will!”

The two men he had thrown to the ground were getting to his feet. They had turned to face him, but had made no move. Perhaps they were scared of Will. But more likely, Will thought, they had begun to doubt the motives of their director.

“Let the girl go.” Will said. “Or I’ll break your arm into pieces.”

“Security!” This time Diamond spoke in a more panicked tone as Will stepped forward. The security officers behind him did not move as Will stepped forward and ripped Lysa from his grasp. She jumped, sobbing, several feet away.

Despite his threat, Will dropped Diamond’s and turned away towards her. “Lysa.” He said quietly. “Are you alright?”

“I’m… f-f-fine…” She said, sobbing quietly. Will held out his hand and handed over her camera. She stared at it unbelievingly as she looked up at him.

“T-thank you…”

“Let’s go.” Will said. “Before he starts any more trouble.”

“Wait just a moment-“

Will ignored him. He wrapped his arm around Lysa and guided her out of the room. She did not fight or argue as they stepped past the guards. She did not speak until they were out in the open.

She stepped away from him the instant they were through the door and he allowed her to. She was crying.

“Why would he do that?” She cried out. “Why in the world would he-“

“I don’t know.” Will said. “But he didn’t want us to do what we had come here to do.”

“Did you… take the picture?”

“I tried.” He shrugged. “Did it save properly? I didn’t get a chance to check…”

Lysa fumbled with the camera, her tears falling down to the pavement. Will waiting with patient breath.

“This…” She said slowly. “It’s not great but… since we know where he works….”

She looked up at him. Her eyes seemed to be burning with a fierce determination.

“I’m going to ruin him.” She said. “I’m going to ruin both of them. I’m going to shut this entire place down if I can. Fuck him.” She seemed to be almost rambling, saying things without thinking them through. But Will could tell that she meant every word.

“We will.” He assured her. “They’re going to regret this. Can you publish the story tonight?”

“I’ll do it now.” She said, wiping her eyes. “Can you… walk me home?”

“I’ll stay with you while you write it.” She gave a startled gasp, and then smiled.

“T-thank you.” She said. “You were… very brave.”

“What were they trying to do?” Will asked her as they set off. “I mean, what was the reasoning behind it?”

“I don’t know.” Lysa said. She seemed somehow deflated after the incident. She seemed somewhat less rambunctious than usual. It was no longer something that she was reporting on: She had become directly involved. She had more context, more experience with it. “But we need to take them to task. He should never have grabbed me.”

She sighed. “I should have left with you.” She said. “I was so shocked I couldn’t-‘

“Don’t apologize.” Will said. “He should never have laid a hand on you.”

She wiped her eyes again. She had been rattled.

“Who was that man?” She asked him. “Did you know him?”

“He’s the Director of the Exhibit.” He said. “A Mr. Diamond, I think his name was.”

“Diamond…” She whispered. “I’ll remember that. Thank you.” She smiled grimly. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“He’s involved.” She said. “Think about it. When you pointed the guy out to me, that’s when he got aggressive.”

Will stopped mid step. Lysa turned around to look at him.

“Him?” Will murmured. “A manager of an Exhibit….?” He shook his head. “He’s involved with the university, I know. I know someone who knows who he is. I’ll ask about him. I’ve heard he’s a creep.”

“Ooooh, do that.” She said, smiling brightly. “And I’d like to speak to this person, if possible.”

“I will.” Will said. He reached for his phone and sent a message to Reiko explaining the situation. By the time he had finished they were a long way away from the building. They were approaching Lysa’s building.

“Um.” She said. “Don’t mind the mess.”

It was awful: Will, being a rather neat and organized person himself, found himself aghast at the strewn about things all over the room. Papers seemed to be everywhere. Half read books on white fragility and police brutality seemed to be lying everywhere, and six mugs surrounded a computer that, although expensive, seemingly had not been very well taken care of.

“Home sweet home.” Lysa said, trying to make light of the situation. Will thought she was rather uncomfortable letting someone into her room like this. He made no comment and tried to find a chair. It seemed like everything, other than the one directly in front of the computer, had something sitting on it. Books or bags or clothes. In the end he opted to stand behind her computer chair as she sat down and booted it up.

The computer, he was surprised to see, was considerably more organized. Her folders were nearly aligned on one side of the screen. She opened twitted in a flash.

“Alright.” She said. “I’ll post the photo first, onto twitter. I’ll let everyone know what happened, and then…”

She plugged the camera into the computer and toggled through some settings. Will, who had never owned a digital camera, was surprised at how quickly the camera was recognized and opened.

She opened her twitter page, uploaded the photo, gave a brief synopsis of what had just happened and then leaned back into her chair. “Done.” She said. “Uh, could you retweet me?”

“Sure.” Will said. He pulled out his phone and did just that. He went ahead and liked the tweet too.

“Alright.” She said. “I’ll get to work on that article. You can… uh, just hang out here, if you want… Has your friend messaged you back yet?”

Reiko had not responded to his text yet. Lysa clicked her tongue with disappointment.

“Well ,we can go over the finer points later.” She said. “The main thing is figuring out who this guy-“ She jabbed her finger at the screen where the blonde man was standing. “Is.” Will nodded.

“How long will it take to figure it out?”

The number of notifications began to go up. It seemed that people were already responding and retweeting the photo.

“Not long.” She said. “Tomorrow, maybe?”

“That soon?”

She giggled. “Probably sooner.” She said, as she clicked on the bell. She scrolled through some of the responses, humming. “Yep. People are going to check it out.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.” She confirmed, smiling, as she turned around to face him. “Impressive, huh? They’ll be asking questions and taking more pictures left and right. That guy won’t know what hit him.”

“Are you serious?”

She looked almost offended that he had to ask. “Yeah!”

And so it was. Over the next hour as Lysa drafted her official article, they began receiving more and more information. Will, rather than sit about and do nothing, had found himself with his phone in his hand, constantly checking and rechecking new bits of information. Little bits and tidbits were coming at them so quickly he had problems processing any of it.

It began with people who were simply in the area. They, after realizing how close the incident had occurred, had wandered over to check it out. They had entered the building and noticed the injured security guards being handed ice packs. This, in and of itself, seemed to confirm the story. Each new person or groups that joined the crowd were swiftly informed that it was real: That the director of the Museum had grabbed a girl and set security on a student.

The growing crowd had attracted the attention of Diamond, who had come out to placate them. He had initially tried claiming that Will

had tried to destroy the exhibits, but when asked about the blonde man he had no answer. He had asked the people to leave, but they had refused. He had had to call the police, and now they were trying to clear the people out of the building.

“Isn’t this great?” Lysa gushed, as she typed furiously at her keyboard. Will nodded, his eyes still on his phone. Update after update, picture after picture of the increasingly flustered looking Diamond, and the police, and the ever growing crowd.

“And done.” Lysa said brightly, as she submitted the finalized document and turned around. “There we go. We win.” She looked very pleased with herself.

Will was staring at his phone. He had barely registered what she had just said. He had just come across a tweet with his name.

“They’re looking for me.” He said.

She turned around. “What?”

“Because I hit those guards” He said. “They’re saying I assaulted them.”

“No, no.” She said. “You were coming to save me. They couldn’t possibly-”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.” He said. He was going through the tweets now, parsing through all of the information. Plenty of people were discussing the situation in depth. The people who were there were giving every little bit of information they could find on there. One of the things they were most fixated on was the identity of the blonde man. But the other, was who he was.

He looked up at her. “I’m going to have to go back.”

“What?” She said, taken aback. “Why?”

“To give our side of the story.” He said. “You can take care of things here, right? Tell everyone that I walked you home and that I’m going right back.”

“Wait just a minute-“

“We can’t let this guy get away.” Will said. “The police are there; Diamond wouldn’t dare try and drive me off again. I’m going to go and give my statement.”

“Will-“

“Stay safe, okay?” He asked her. “I’ll call if anything happens.”

“But-“

He had stood up and stretched. He was determined. It would end tonight. He would turn that man over to the police, no matter the cost. It would probably be smarter to stay here and wait for it all to blow over… but Diamond and the police already knew his name anyway. He may as well go there, and point out the man.

He walked to the door, opened, and stepped outside. He took in a deep breath and set off down the stairs.

The sun was setting by now. He made his way along the streets back to the exhibit. His head bent, his hands in his pockets, his eyes forward.

He passed very few people on his way down there. Those he did seemed to be heading to the same place he was.

He was part of a group of five or six people by the time he arrived at the exhibit. None had paid him any mind: all of them seemed to simply be checking out the disturbance.

Twenty of thirty people seemed to be standing right outside the exhibit. An argument seemed to have broken out on the front of the doors.

“There was no girl.” Diamond was saying patiently, as Will and the group approached. “These people are misinformed. I want them gone.”

The police officer in front of him was nodding, but Will couldn’t make out any words. A group of them were standing on the steps. It seemed they had driven the crowd out of the building and onto the sidewalk.

“What’s going on?” Will asked a nearby man as they approached.

“Some crazy situation, man.” The man, who seemed to be a student, told him. “Apparently that guy up there grabbed hurt some little girl.”

Will nodded. So it seemed that the crowd hadn’t been convinced by Diamond’s version of events. He turned to look up at him.

“I’m telling you; you need to find Will Wei.” He said. “He’s caused nothing but trouble. He’s behind this-“

“What have I done, exactly?”

The crowd gaped as Will pushed through the crowd and stared up at Diamond. Diamond looked down at him, his glasses glinting in the light.

“There he is, Officers.” He said haughtily. “The man who assaulted my security.”

“Where is he, Diamond?” Will asked. “The Blonde man.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about-“

“You don’t want people to find out who he is.” Will interrupted. “Why is that?”

The Officer stepped forward.

“We can talk about this down at the station-“ He began.

“Officer.” Will said. “There’s a sex trafficker working in this building. He has blonde hair and I believe this man is protecting him-“

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Diamond said. “You have caused nothing but trouble all three times you have come here-“

“Three?” Will repeated. Diamond flushed. Will took another step up the stairs. “One was tonight. Another was when I saw that man. And the first was when he attacked me after a girl tried running away from him.”

Diamond froze. His eyes became shifty and unfocused. They were darting all over the police. Will felt a strong sense of satisfaction. Diamond had clearly been very stressed out these past few hours. Surely that had not been the only slip up he had made regarding his version of events.

“I won’t ask you again.” Will said. “Where is-“

“That’s enough.’ The Officer said, as he stepped in between them. “You are out of line, kid.”

Will looked up at him. “What?”

“You’re under arrest.”

“Why?”

“For all that you’ve done.”

Will stared past him towards Diamond. Diamond was smiling. Will found himself angry.

The cop moved forward and tried to grab him. Will, moving instinctively, leapt back and landed on the concrete. He stared up at the Officer, staring upward.

“Resisting arrest, are you? The Officer asked, as he stepped down. “That’s a crime.”

“I’m not resisting.” Will said, as he stood up. This guy wasn’t listening. He gestured for the crowd to close in around him as he descended, handcuffs in hand. Will stared at him, hardly daring to move. Dare he resist arrest further? Dare he strike? Assaulting an officer was a crime.

But behind him, an angry voice.

“Hear the kid out!” Someone shouted. Several angry voices joined the sentiment, and Will found himself surrounded by a bunch of people. They were not cutting off his escape, like the Officer had clearly indicated they should do, but they were surrounding him. Protecting him.

“Out of the way!” The Officer snapped. “Or you’re ALL going to be under arrest!”

“Listen to me!” Will said, through the mass of people. “Alice is a girl who was being held by this man. We need to find him, or-“

“We handle the crimes around here!” The Officer shouted. Will found himself losing his temper. The man simply wasn’t listening. He

seemed to be the one in charge. The officers around were standing idly by, watching. Will could not help but notice a lot of them looked very confused. If he could sway them, maybe they had a chance.

Will pushed himself out of the crowd. "Listen to me!" He called up to them. "Alice was being trafficked for sex. I-"

The Officer smashed him across the face with the back of his hand. Will reeled as the officer tried grabbing his wrist and twisting it behind him. The surprise of being struck caused Will to forget himself momentarily. The cry of the crowd behind him, and the pain across his face made him entirely forget that he was dealing with a police officer that he should honor and respect. The furious rage that had been building up within him for days burst. He forgot all about the police and their authority over him. He was now just another opponent.

He kicked furiously at the officer's knee from behind. A furious CRACK filled the air as the Officer cried out and loosened his grip on him. Will spun around and slammed his elbow into the side of the man's head, sending him slamming into the stairs. He slammed into the concrete and rolled down. The crowd roared and advanced upon him, shouting furiously as Will focused his attention on the fight ahead.

The other officers began to advance upon him, looking wary, but a furious roar welled up from behind him. The people began to charge, up the staircase and to the officers, and formed a kind of makeshift wall between them. The officers struggled and fought, but the crowd pushed back against them.

"Where is Diamond!" Will screamed, trying to raise his voice above the din. "Where did he go!"

"Back inside, man!" Someone called out to him. Will nodded to him in thanks and rushed forward, knocking aside the officer directly in his way.

Will pushed his way through the crowd and came to the glass door. He tried to open it. But it was locked tight. He raised his leg and

kicked with all of his might.

It shattered into pieces. Will pulled his leg back and fumbled with door as the crowd behind him continued to struggle. He hoped they would distract any more officers that were surely to come on the scene. He was beginning to feel that he was going to have to take matters into his own hands.

He managed to unlock the door and step into the empty exhibit. He had been here twice already, but had no idea where the staff or Diamond himself would try and run. His first thought was to head for the garage: They had tried smuggling Alice out through that way, it would only stand to reason that Diamond would go out that way too. Will made his way down that way.

He made his way slowly down the hall. It was so quiet in the building that he was sure that he was alone, but he also knew that if he could make out any sign of footsteps he would be easily able to pinpoint them. He heard nothing, and proceeded to the garage without incident.

He opened the door slowly, and peeked out towards it. The van, the very same truck that he had seen these people get away in, was sitting there.

He felt a strong surge of anger in him. How had the Police missed this thing coming back? He had specifically given them a description of it when he had been taken in. They had told him they were going to look for it, didn't they? How could they have missed it? Here, in the location it was hiding in to start with!

He stepped out to the garage and ran a hand alongside it. He reached the front door and opened it. It was impeccably clean and tidy. He stared at it for a while, before climbing inside and looking towards the back.

He had feared that he would come across another tied up girl there, but there was nothing. He could see the customized seats on either side of the van, going lengthwise along the side of the vehicle. Will surmised this was to pack multiple girls in here at once, if necessary.

He wondered how many had been transported this way. It made him angry.

He closed the door and backed away, turning back to the door. No one was coming this way. There was no sound of the situation outside. No one had come in to find him. He was completely alone. He had his opportunity to investigate the premise, but now he was completely lost.

He turned back to the vehicle and climbed inside, pulling out his phone. He snapped photographs of the back seat of the van, and of the van itself, and then sent it to Lysa. After a moment's consideration he moved to the back of the vehicle and snapped a photo of the license plate. If the Police were not going to investigate the van, then he may as well have Lysa do it.

He stood up and turned back to the door. It was not a small building. The crowd had congregated around the front door, but there had surely been others. Diamond could easily have slipped out and escaped.

If that was the case, he had the entire building to himself. He decided that he would try and search for Diamond's office.

He stepped back out into the hallway and looking around. A bunch of rooms arranged by theme and historical period lined either side. He wouldn't do office work where people would be attending…

He made his way back to the Entrance Hall. The crowd was still struggling with the police, but it seemed that more officers had arrived on the scene. None of them had stepped inside yet. Will looking around. He had seen Diamond in this room, both times when he had first entered the hall. He had come out to speak with Reiko, and then to him. So he could see who came into the building.

He began looking around the area where Diamond had come from, and found another hallway. He stepped down it, and was relieved to find a series of offices, all with name plates on the doors. He walked along it, staring at each name plate, until he came to the very final one. DIAMOND.

Will kicked at the door. It burst open. It appeared that it had not been locked. Will barely had time to register his good fortune when his eyes fell on the state of the office. It looked like it had been completely torn apart. Papers and folders were lying all over the desks and floor.

The TV screen that seemed to show security footage was hanging from the ceiling over the computer screen. Apparently Diamond could watch everything that happened in the facility from here. Will found himself wondering how legal that was. Surely it wasn't the Directors place to watch everything in the building?

He glanced over the TV screen and was disappointed to see that the only activity he could see was that of the front gate. The struggle was getting more and more intense. He felt a strong sense of gratitude towards the crowd: It was only because of them that he was here now.

But where was Diamond? Or the Blonde man? Will stared at the screens, thinking deeply. Would they really have vacated the premises? This was Diamond's office, and it seemed that he paid very close attention to the public areas of the Exhibit.

But that was it. The only images on the screen were from the public areas. He didn't see any offices or areas for staff on there. It was possible they were still in the building. But where?

Will turned to the desk. He stared at the mess of papers, and took notice of how neat and tidy the desk was outside of these papers. Curiously, he picked them up and rifled through them.

These seemed to be printed out e-mails. They were structured like them and formatted like them, but Will couldn't understand why they all seemed to have been printed out this way. He organized them and flipped through them.

Hello, I have a question about my delivery. I was looking for a very modern Chinese piece with a bit of a western influence. Not an antique. This is not quite what I was looking for.

Will stared at it, the gears in his head turning. This didn't seem right. This didn't seem natural. This was not an order for an item, but something else entirely. It was some kind of code. Will, immediately, snapped a photo of it and sent it to Lysa.

He rifled through them and began sorting through them. He glanced at a lot of them, but in the end decided it would be best to simply take them all. Before he could, however, the police on the security feed entered the facility, weapons drawn.

Will stared at them as darted around, pointing their weapons every which direction. On impulse he reached for the office door, slowly shut it, and locked it. He took steps back, and watched as the police began to move around the building.

What were they doing? They looked as if they were prepared to shoot. Prepared for what? Will, immediately, raised his phone to the screen and hit record. He recorded the image of the police stalking the premises for about a minute, and then sent the footage to Lysa.

He probably shouldn't leave the room. It wouldn't be safe. He thought about messaging Lysa with updates about where he was, but he decided against it. He didn't need his location blasted across the entire internet. She probably was just posting everything he sent at this point.

He couldn't tell what was happening with the crowd outside, so he focused on watching the police. He watched them move from room to room. As he had thought the cameras seemed to cover the public areas, so that Diamond could watch the patrons from his office. He had no trouble following the movements of the police from room to room.

But wasn't that a little strange? Why had they not come down this way? Towards the offices? He could not hear them through the door. They seemed almost to be wandering around at random, but the way they seemed to be staying on the cameras struck him as a little odd. If the offices were out of bounds, how many other rooms were as well? And why were the cops seemingly not venturing into any of them?

Will began watching them carefully, making sure that he was not mistaken. He felt that he was not. He could clearly see that the cops were focusing on searching the exhibit itself, rather than the office. To what purpose? Surely they would have realized, like he had, that Diamond would have been likely to hide in his office, or some other staff area. Just what were they doing?

Will glanced back and forth, trying to make sense of the situation. His eyes fell on a door opening.

It was the blonde man. He stood facing a cop. He blinked, and then stopped. The cop waved at him to go ahead.

Will stared. He fumbled for his phone, but by the time the exchange had occurred they had moved on, in opposite directions.

Will knew he couldn't let him get away: This was his chance to bring him in. His photo was already out there, on the internet. The police had no reason to simply let him go. It seemed that he would have to catch him himself.

He watched the man as he headed down a hallway. Will had a suspicion that he was heading back to the garage. He unlocked the door and stepped out. He was aware of just how much danger he was in: The police were wandering the halls with weapons drawn. It was very possible he would be shot by accident. Nevertheless, he stepped out into the hallway and down into the entrance hall.

The security feed had not had sound (Or at least it had not been on) Now that he was standing back out here he could hear the crowd outside. It seemed as if there was still some kind of struggle going on, which made the police presence in the building even more curious.

Will walked down the hallway, carefully listening for any sign of oncoming footsteps. By this point he knew exactly where the garage was, and headed straight there. The cops by now had entered further into the exhibit, and he hoped that if was quick he would not encounter any.

He was in luck. He found himself in front of the door, and opened it. He slipped inside and shut the door behind him. He slowly stepped forward and opened the door.

The truck was still there. Will felt himself deflate as he stepped back. He was completely out of ideas. He had really thought that he would be in here.

The door opened behind him. Will turned around as the blonde man stepped into the room. They stared at each other.

"Funny running into you here." Will said.

The man turned and ran. He tried to slam the door behind him, but Will slammed it back open with his shoulder. He tried to ignore the throbbing pain as he took off after the blonde man.

The blonde man was quite quick, but Will was faster. Despite the throbbing pain in his shoulder he was able to overtake him and leaped forward, trying to tackle him to the ground. The man, as if sensing his presence, spun around and tried to smash his elbow into his head. Will ducked, and the blow grazed his cheek as he threw the man to the ground.

Will brought down a fierce punch to the man's cheek. He cried out as the blow connected. He struggled, and threw Will off balance. He rolled over and tried punching Will again, but before he could Will launched out a powerful kick at his stomach. The man cried out in pain, wincing, as Will regained his bearings, got to his knees, and held him down.

The man continued to struggle as Will worked to restrain him. He had no rope or handcuffs, so he had to resort to roughly twisting his arms across his back and just holding him there. He fought and pushed every step of the way, but Will was so much physically stronger than him he couldn't even begin to fight out of his grip. His struggles gave way to mere squirms as Will lay on top of him.

"Now where were you going?" Will asked him conversationally, as he twisted the man's arm behind him. "Where's Diamond?"

“I don’t know!” The man cried. “Honest!” Will tightened his grip and the man yelled out. He could hear rapid footsteps coming down to where he was. He braced himself for the inevitable confrontation, but continued talking.

“What were you going to do with the girl?”

“I do-“

Will cruelly twisted his arm even harder. The man cried out.

“She was too old!” He blurted out.

Will was about to open his mouth to ask him to elaborate, but the footsteps were getting louder. He looked up to see three cops standing at the end of the hallway, all of them pointing weapons straight at him. “Freeze!”

Will stopped.

“Get away from him!”

“Do you know who this man is?” Will asked. “He is a sex trafficker. He-“

“Off!”

Will had no choice. He stood up and backed away as the Officer’s rapidly stepped towards him. They stepped past the man and the ground and rushed towards him.

“On your knees!”

“Officer, this man-“

The man lowered his gun and punched him. Will stood steadfast, unwilling to show the man how much the blow had hurt. The man stared up at him, and Will could see a flicker of fear in his fear. He brandished the weapon again.

“This man is a criminal.” Will said slowly, but clearly. “I came here to help you identify him.” He was trying to stay calm, but he could feel the cold, staring eyes of the police on him.

“I will not ask you again. On your knees.”

“You’re making a mistake.” Will said, as he did as he was told. The blonde man sat up.

“He’s a madman!” The guy blubbered. “He’s insane! He just attacked me-“

“He’s attacked several people tonight.” The Officer told him. “He will be dealt with.”

Will sat quietly. Fear and anxiety began welling up inside of him. They weren’t listening to him. They were going to let him free.

“Look.” Will said. “This man is involved in some kind of sex trafficking scheme. “If you-“

“Shut up!”

Will gasped as he was booted in the face by one of the officers. He fell with a cry onto his back, as the officer quickly bent down and restrained him.

They’re cops, they should be doing the right thing. They need to listen to me. How do I get them to listen to me?

Will had no idea: He had gotten himself into a situation that there was no talking his way out of. He couldn’t fight three armed men with guns. The man was going to be set free.

Will closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down. He allowed himself to be spun around and handcuffed by the police. He was dragged to his feet and watched as the blonde man was helped to his feet.

“He’s crazy.” The blonde man was saying, barely able to contain his glee. “He assaulted me, Officer…”

“I know, I know.” The Officer said. “We’ve already been told.”

Will was dragged backward, away from him. One cop stayed behind to question the man as Will was dragged back through the museum.

“Breaking and entering, assault… improperly attempting a citizen’s arrest against an innocent man. You’re looking at years worth of jail time buddy.”

Will said nothing. He knew that he was better off consulting a lawyer. He noted that he had not been read his rights. Perhaps he could use that in court. Perhaps he was thinking a little bit too far ahead.

He was led out of the front of the building, right through the hole he had made in the glass door. The crowd was still out there, making noise.

"We got him." The officer told a companion gruffly, as they pushed Will forward. "He attacked a civilian though…"

"Really?" The other officer looked at Will. "I'm not surprised."

Will said nothing. The crowd beneath them was chanting furiously.

"What are they yelling about now?"

"Get him in the car and I'll tell you."

Will was pushed down the steps of the museum and walked down to the sidewalk. The crowd was shouting furiously. He could hear chants of his name (Will, Will, Will) and demands to release him. The cops did not pay them any mind.

Will had a sudden burst of inspiration.

"They let him get away!" He shouted, at the top of his lungs. "The police let him get awa-"

The man brought up the butt of the gun and slammed it into his face. He staggered as blood began to run down his nose and across his lip. The crowd let out a distressed cry and moved towards them. Undaunted, the officer shoved Will roughly into the police car, and stepped away. The car took off, screeching away from the crowd of people as the officer held them off, baton raised.

Will leaned back in the car and exhaled. He tried to relax as the angry crowd encircled the officer behind hm. It certainly did not feel like much of a success. Here he was, captured by the police, while the man he had come here to gather information on had been let go. Diamond too, had disappeared. He wondered how things looked

on Lysa's end. From where he was sitting things were looking very poor indeed.

They came to a stop outside the station and he was once again pulled out and dragged up. He was placed in the same jail cell as last time and left alone. Again. Will sat patiently, waiting for someone to come to him. He wondered how the interrogation would go this time.

He tried to ignore the ebbing pain in his jaw and nose as he sat and waited. He felt strangely calm and in control, although he had no idea what he was going to do or say. A big part of that was that he was not entirely sure what had just happened. He had been completely ignored when he had explained why he had done what he had done, and arrested for his trouble. He wasn't angry: Getting angry would not help him out of this situation.

But then again, being angry over what had happened to Alice had been what had brought him here.

It did not feel like long before the police came for him again. They opened the door and brought him out, just as they had last time. Will stepped out, and found himself walking back to the same interrogation room.

Stefani was not here this time. The only man he recognized was Ratcliffe, who was standing, as he had been the first time, by the table. The second cop was far bigger. Will had never seen him before.

"Have a seat." The man said, gesturing in front of him. Will sat. He folded his hands in front of himself on the table.

"Back again, are you Will?" Ratcliffe asked, sneering. There was no trace of the friendly neighborhood cop this time. Will thought it best to make his concerns clear.

"I want a lawyer."

"Not until we have a little chat."

"Isn't that illegal?"

“You have been misinformed.” The cop said firmly. “We need to get to the bottom of this. You’re in a lot of trouble young man.”

“Am I?” Will found himself unimpressed.

“You were already warned after what happened the other day.” The cop snapped. “You had no business going back there, and for what? To cause more trouble?”

“To prevent more trouble from occurring.” Will said smoothly. He wasn’t nervous, anxious, or hesitating. The man was trying to frighten him, but Will wasn’t easily frightened. “Do you know what I was trying to accomplish?”

“Destroying Museum property-“

“I was on the hunt for a sex trafficker.” Will said coldly. The man froze.

“A sex trafficker?” He repeated. “At a museum?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the most ridiculous story I ever heard.”

“The man I had detained when I was arrested was the guy you want.” Will said. “But your people let him go.”

The man looked at Ratcliffe.

“Is this true?”

“There was no one like that.” Ratcliffe said.

Will stared at them. They looked down on him with empty stares.

“So.” The man said, triumphantly. “You tried to lie to us, eh? You have no evidence that this person exists?”

Will stared up at them blankly.

“It’s already on the internet.”

The man stopped. His looked up at Ratcliffe, and then at the window, and then back down at Will. It suddenly dawned on Will that they had no idea what he was talking about.

“O… On the internet?”

“Yes.” Will said. “Your men just let him go. Even though I pointed him out to you, several times. You didn’t listen. And I have proof.”

“What proof?” The man demanded. “What proof do you-“

“The rioters…” Ratcliffe murmured. “Where did they come from?” He looked around worriedly.

“Isn’t it interesting?” Will asked coldly, as he got to his feet. “How a bunch of dedicated, determined everyday people… can track down this criminal several times, provide intricate details on where he works, what he looks like, what he drives… and yet the police cannot detain him. In fact, they seem to actively resist the idea.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about-“

“You’re protecting him.” Will said slowly, as his eyes settled on Ratcliffe. He could feel the air starting to chill. Ratcliffe looked visibly nervous and uneasy. The other, bigger man had no expression. But Will felt as if he could see right through this.

“This isn’t about the Museum.” Will said slowly. “You don’t want people to know-“

“I think that will be all we need from you-“ The man began.

“That you’re protecting a sex predator-“

“That’s ENOUGH!” The big man roared. He gestured to the window. Will turned to face it.

“Who’s’ there!” He cried out. “Who’s watching? I-“

The big man reached forward and wrapped his hands around Will’s neck. Will, already extremely agitated by all that had happened, grabbed his wrist and slammed him against the mirror.

He cried out as he slammed into the mirror with a thud. Ratcliffe cried out and drew a pistol as Will pulled him back, prepared to slam him into the glass again.

“Freeze!”

Will made as if to slam the man into the barrier again. Ratcliffe pulled the trigger.

Will ducked, throwing his opponent to the ground as the bullet soared through the air and crashed through the one way mirror. A large crack appeared across the surface.

Will, thinking quickly, jumped forward and kicked at the hole the bullet had left. He shattered the glass into pieces. He leapt again, into the darkened room on the other side of the glass. Ratcliffe gasped, and lowered the weapon.

He stood before a couple of shocked looking people who appeared to have been taking notes on the situation. They stared at him, seemingly horrified as he glared down at them angrily.

"I think we're done here." Will said shortly. "Try going after real criminals." He stepped past them and to their door, and let himself out.

He stepped out of the police station with a sigh and looked around. He wondered how long it would take for them to try and come after him. His phone had been taken from him and he had no real desire to go and retrieve it. He had no way of getting in contact with Jason or anyone else.

He had no choice. He was going to have to go back to Lysa's place. He didn't feel comfortable going home under these conditions, and he doubted they would look for him there. And so off he went, keeping off the main roads and keeping a close eye out for any police cars or black vans.

He saw nothing of the sort. He kept diving into alleys and waiting, as if expecting something to jump out at him, but nothing came. He wondered if they would be going straight to his home or contacting his parents. The thought worried him.

He soon found himself right outside of Lysa's building. He remembered the floor and room number and climbed up to her place. Her knocked on her door.

It took her a while to answer. When she opened the door she looked very happy to see him.

“Will!” She said. “What happened? I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for over an hour!”

“A lot.” Will said dryly, as he stepped inside the apartment. She peered at his face intently, taking in his injuries. “Hang on, I’ll get you a rag.”

Will nodded, and collapsed on her couch. She brought him a wet rag and handed it to him. He thanked her as he wiped away the dried blood on his face.

“What happened?” She asked him, as she moved over to the computer.

He told her. Before he had even finished her fingers were already clacking against the keyboard.

“They can’t get away with this.” She said. “Did you get any more photos?”

“I lost my phone. They took it when I was brought in.”

“Hm.” She said. “Pity.” She clicked her tongue. “Well, that shouldn’t be any trouble. You did very well in sending me things… I was able to keep people updated. May I go ahead and let people know what happened to you?”

“Go ahead.”

“Great.” She said. “I don’t think they’ll be able to deny that they saw the guy… that photo you took off the security feed is pretty strong evidence. And they went after you instead of…”

She was practically murmuring to herself now as she typed.

“The crowd has been dispersed.” She told him. “But there were no arrests made. I think they were hoping they would go home and forget about it. But they’ll be back. Once I get to work on my next article putting all of this together.” She seemed very pleased with herself. “Oooh, we’ve been wanting to get the police on something for a long time. I’ve heard so many terrible stories, you have no idea….”

Will groaned. Lysa turned to look at him.

“You really do look terrible.” She said. “Maybe you should get home and get some sleep.”

“I think they’ll be looking for me there.”

“Well, maybe you should go to where Alice is hiding.” Lysa suggested. “Wherever that is.”

“Lysa.” He said. “Do you want to meet her?”

Lysa turned to look at him, her mouth open in a wide O.

“You’ve done a great job.” He said. “Maybe… if you could meet her and write about her, then maybe…”

“Yes, I would love that.” She said quickly. “I…. thank you. Thank you very much.” She turned back around to the computer. “I’ll finish this article, and we can go see her tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Yeah.” He said. “And Lysa… Thank you.”

He left the building and walked out into the street. Now that he had spoken with Lysa, and had some time to relax, he wondered whether he should duck on home and get into bed. He was feeling rather worn out from the day’s events. But the lingering worry that the cops would be in pursuit of him still lingered. Surely they would have no problems tracking him down. In the end he decided to risk it. He had nowhere else to go, after all. The last thing he needed was the police to break down Jason’s door and find Alice watching anime. No, he would go tomorrow, when it was light out.

He stopped when he reached his street and looked around. He saw a number of vehicles, but none that looked like police cars or black vans. He crept up to his house and opened the door.

He stepped inside to find Wolf passed out on the couch. He looked around a bit, wondering vainly whether he was being overtly paranoid. There was nothing. He went to his room and locked the door. And for good measure, pulled the curtain on his window down.

Despite how tired he was, he found it very difficult to even consider sleeping. The worry and unease about what had just happened, and what it meant for him, was a bit overbearing. When he lied down in

bed and stared upward, he had no idea what to feel or think. He had moved and acted purely on instinct. He had no idea as to what was going on. Why were the police so hostile? Were they truly associated with the traffickers? Wouldn't that mean that every girl on Campus was at risk? The possibilities made his head spin.

He needed to stop and reconsider the facts.

1. Alice escaped from Sex traffickers.
2. These sex traffickers had some of influence in the university.
3. The Police had gone to great lengths to ignore his testimony.

He wished he still had his phone. He would have liked to take notes on it while he was trying to fall asleep. He hoped he would remember everything in the morning. Or, he supposed, Lysa could remember it for him…

When he awoke he honestly did not remember why he had gone to bed so stressed. It took him until he sat out of bed until he remembered all that had happened the night before. The pain in his head had faded, although it still stung. He took a longer than usual shower (A part of him wished he had cleaned up last night) and stepped out and flopped into his bed, completely naked.

He wanted to do nothing but lie here, but he knew that he had to get going. With no phone, he had no way of getting in contact with the others. He had no idea what Lysa was up to, but even more worrisome he had never heard back from Reiko or Jason. He elected to visit them first. He would need to let them know that Lysa was coming.

He dressed and stepped upside. Wolf was munching on a sandwich as he watched some competitive Overwatch on their TV. Will walked past him without speaking to him and out onto the porch.

He was surprised that the police had not come for him. Surely it would not have been that difficult to find out where he lived? But it seemed they had let him get a good night's sleep. Will was grateful,

but he found himself questioning their motives. What exactly why they trying to accomplish? They had panicked when he had told them he had already released information to Lysa. Perhaps that had something to do with it? He wondered whether he would be allowed back in there.

He was still a little cautious when heading to Jason's place, but in the sheer light of the sun, and the energy of the people around him, he felt much more comfortable than he had the night before. He could scarcely imagine that anything bad would happen here, in broad daylight.

But then again, wasn't Alice being transported during the day?

He found himself at Jason's house, and he looked around anxiously before knocking on the door. It was a while before anyone answered.

"Jason…?"

It was Reiko. She yawned, looking worn out, and blinked.

"Oh." She said.. "You're Will." She yawned again. Will hurriedly stepped inside.

"Are you alright?" He asked, concerned. Reiko yawned again.

"No sleep…" She murmured. "I… I…." She yawned again and stumbled. Will had to reach out and catch her.

"I'll look after Alice." He promised. "Get some sleep, okay?"

"Hmmm…."

He had to drag her back to her room and put her to bed. He stopped to make sure she was nice and comfortable before stepping to the door and shutting off the light. How long had it been since she had last gotten sleep? Will was beginning to get very worried. She didn't look well at all. He would have to remember to speak to Jason about it.

He had to walk around to find Alice. She wasn't in the room she had been last time, the one she had been watching One Piece on. As it turned it, she was in another room.

She jolted as he came into the living room. He stopped as he stared down at her guilty looking expression. A half played Chess game lay out before her.

"Hello." Will said, as he looked down at her. "Don't tell me… Was Reiko playing you?"

Alice nodded.

"She's asleep." Will told her, as he kneeled down. "Um. I'll play you. If you like."

He looked down at the board in earnest. Reiko, it seemed, had positively ravaged her opponent, in spite of her crippling exhaustion. "Is the game over?"

Alice shook her head.

"Well, I suppose we may as well finish it." Will said. He had never picked up a half finished chess game in his life. The odds were overwhelmingly in his favor: It appeared that Reiko had either managed to save nearly all of her more powerful pieces, or had promoted so many pawns that it simply gave off that impression. Alice, on the other hand, had nothing but a bishop and a lone, powerless king that had somehow moved onto the other half of the board, very near his own king. He suspected that Reiko must have been toying with her all game.

"Yes!" Alice said, sounding enthusiastic. "We will!"

"You like Chess?' Will asked, as he glanced down at the board. He had no idea whose move it was. Alice was intently watching him, so he decided to go ahead and move a knight.

"Very." She said, as she moved her Bishop three squares diagonally, closer to her King. "Reiko has been teaching me."

"Really?" Will said. He had learned to play from Reiko as well. She had been a very skilled player while she was in school, and still had a lot of enthusiasm for the game. "She's a great player."

Alice nodded. "I've never won." She said sadly. "Not once."

Will moved his other knight. His goal was to trap her king by surrounding it with his own pieces. “Neither have I.” He admitted. “I can beat Jason though.”

“A child could beat Jason.” Alice said. The pompous statement was so out of nowhere that Wil could not help but laugh.

“What is so funny?” Alice asked.

“Nothing.” He said. “You’re scared of him, aren’t you?”

She fell silent.

“Very much.” She said slowly. “Or… not him…. But men. All men.” She stared at the board as if thinking deeply about something.

“All men?” Will repeated slowly. “Even… me…?”

She looked up at him.

“You are different.” She said slowly. “You… did not need to do this for me. You did not need to keep me from… you did not use me or…” She shook her head. She seemed unable to find the words. She moved a chess piece. Will wasn’t paying attention to which one.

“I thought…” She murmured. “That… maybe… you would be taking me to another…. That I would be presented before someone else.”

“Presented?” Will repeated, bemused. “What do you mean?”

“An offering.” She said quietly. “A reward for deeds done and favors freely given.” She sounded bitter.

“Reward?” Will repeated, as he moved another piece. “You mean-“

“I was brought here.” She said. “To please a man. But I was not to his liking, and he sent me away. He demanded a replacement. Younger… more oriental.” She smiled ruefully. “I am only half Chinese.”

“He wanted a… Chinese woman?” Will repeated. His mind went back to what he had read on the sheet. “MODERN ORIENTAL.”

“A pure Chinese woman, yes.” Alice said. “I was… Most prefer my look, but he was looking for something specific. And so I was tossed aside.”

“And you decided to….?”

“Run.” She whispered. “I decided to try to run.”

She spoke nothing more. She turned her head down and stared at the board. “Check.” She said. Her eyes widened as her eyes traced over the board. “And…. She whispered, already daring to believe it. “Mate?”

Will stared down, horrified. His eyes raced all over the board, unable to believe it. Out of some bizarre fluke, he had somehow cornered himself with his own troops. Alice’s bishop blocked off the only avenue of escape, and her king had her pinned against the side of the board. He was stuck.

“I think so!” Will repeated, amazed. “Wow!” He looked up at her, grinning, at her shocked expression.

“I’ve never won before!” She said. “I really won?”

“I think so!” Will said, as he took another look at the board again. “That has to be the biggest comeback I’ve ever seen.”

“You mismanaged her strategy.” Alice told him. “You fell into her own play.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe it.” She whispered. “I really won.”

“Let’s have a rematch.” Will suggested, as he cleared the board. “And do this properly.”

Alice actually smiled. “Yes!”

They played another three games. Although Alice was still learning, Will could tell that she had an innate knack for the game. She seemed to have picked up on some basic strategies and maneuvers from Reiko, and set them against him. However, as he had played against Reiko before, he was easily able to counter them. She had a tendency to start off strongly, but then fall apart as her pieces left the board. Will surmised that this was mostly due to a lack of experience.

He managed to win all three games, but nowhere near as easily as Reiko apparently had.

Alice, although still elated at her win, seemed somewhat disappointed every time she lost.

“This is how you get better.” He told her. “By playing someone better than you.”

“Could you possibly lose on purpose?” She asked. “To make me feel better?”

“How would you learn then?”

“I’ve learned plenty these past few games!” She replied haughtily. The two looked at each other and laughed. She had not been like this at all when they had first met. She had went from a shy, damaged girl to a surprisingly snarky one in a matter of days. He liked the change.

“Are you staying today?” Alice asked him, as they put the board away. Will hesitated.

“I’m not sure.” He said slowly. “I… want… to. But a lot has happened.”

Alice looked at him, concerned.

“School?” She sounded envious. Will shook his head.

“Not school.” He said, suddenly realizing that he was probably supposed to be in class. He had lost track of what day it was. “I’m…” He wondered what he should tell her. He couldn’t tell her about his affairs with these people. Could he? Would it upset her? But maybe it would bring in some valuable insight into their organization. It was worth the risk.

“I’m looking into the people that kidnapped you.” He said. “I want to know more about them, and I want to take them down.”

Alice stared at him with wide eyes. She seemed somehow taken aback.

“You….” She repeated slowly. “Take them…. Down?”

“Yeah.” Will said. “I’m doing what I can, but I have no idea what I’m dealing with.” He was apprehensive. He had no idea how she was

going to react to this information. She was unpredictable. He didn't want to upset her. She seemed too shocked to speak. It took her a while to find her words.

"What do you need to know?"

"Anything you can tell me."

Alice closed her eyes. She seemed to almost be bracing herself for something. When she opened them again she was a lot more cool and collected.

"I will tell you all I can."

Finally. Will said. She was starting to feel comfortable enough to cooperate.

"I think we need to start with you." Will said. "Who exactly are you?"

"I am Alice." She said. "I am… whoever I need to be."

"Are you…." Will hesitated. "A… prostitute?"

She did not answer right away.

"I do not know what I am." She said. "I am told to always be obedient. To stay thin and healthy. To serve men."

She looked somehow downcast. Will thought he knew what she was getting at. Although her services as a companion were sexual in nature, she had no real agency or control over her situation. She did not choose this life. She had been forced into the lifestyle, likely from a young age, and kept away from a society that might contaminate her.

"Was the day you escaped… What happened that day? What happened exactly?"

She looked at him. Her eyes were dead and expressionless.

"I am too old." She said. "I have been told that for the past couple of years. They have looked into marrying me off to interested parties, and they thought that this man might be a match. He was not interested, and so I was sent away." She smiled ruefully. "But they were in such a hurry to leave they did not tie me up properly."

Too old… She looked younger than he did. She couldn't have been much older than eighteen or nineteen. This was a child trafficking ring.

"I tried to break for freedom, and met you." She said. "And…. I ended up here." She stopped speaking. Her story was not particularly long, but it was enlightening, nonetheless. "I… had failed." She said. "I had repulsed him. I had made him angry. I had displeased him. If I had gone back I would likely have been abandoned… so I decided to take matters into my own hands."

She shrugged her shoulders. Will felt a strong surge of sympathy and affection for her. He wanted to ask her more questions, but he stopped himself. Lysa would need to hear this.

"I have a friend." He said. "A very good friend… She's a reporter. She covers stories like yours. I've been speaking to her about you, and she wants to meet you. Do you think… that she can come over later today? You can tell her everything you told me."

Alice stared at him. "Reporter…..?" She repeated. "Like.. Superman's girlfriend Lois Lane?"

"Yes, exactly like that." He wondered how she could have possibly grown up knowing about Lois Lane and not real reporters. He suspected that fictional media was probably a bit more permissible in her environment than real media. He pictured her reading a Superman comic. The image looked ridiculous.

"I…" She seemed about to answer, but then changed her mind. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"No." Will said, surprised. "Just a friend."

"Oh." She said. "I see." At last she nodded. "I will speak to her." She said. "I…. hope you will join us?"

"Of course." Will said. "I wouldn't miss it."

He stood up. "I'll go get her now." He said. "I'm not sure when I'll be back… but you'll see me again."

"Promise?"

She held out her hand to him. He smiled and took it.

“I promise.”

He didn’t leave right away: He hadn’t had breakfast yet, and neither, apparently, had Alice. They made their way to the kitchen and raided Jason’s kitchen. Will was hungry enough to eat just about anything on the menu, but decided on pancakes and eggs. Alice stood with him as he cooked, occasionally helping with stirring or pouring batter. She looked very pleased with herself when they finished, although her happiness faded as Will loaded them onto plates.

“We’re not going to eat ALL of that, are we?” She asked anxiously.

“I made a little extra for Jason and Reiko.” Will said. “Besides, I’m hungry.”

“But it’s so much!” Alice protested. Will recalled how she had mentioned how the things she ate were heavily regulated. She had probably been pushed into eating as little as possible her entire life. The thought made him feel somewhat nauseous.

“It’s fine.” He told her. “Eat as much as you can, okay?”

“But-“

She stared down at her stack of pancakes warily, and then nodded to herself. She took the fork and knife and began to neatly cut them into shreds. She stuck the pancake with a fork, and then raised it to her mouth.

She looked up at him.

“It’s delicious!”

And she had some more.

They ended up sitting at the table for about an hour, laughing and sharing stories. They barely noticed when the door opened.

“Oh, it’s you kids.” Jason said, as he stepped inside with a bag of groceries. “I thought it seemed a little bit noisy.” His eyes flickered over Will, and Will could instantly tell that he knew what had happened last night. Alice fell silent and looked embarrassed.

“Sorry.” Will said. “We didn’t wake Reiko, did we?”

“Doubt it.” Jason said. “She’s so worn out that she could sleep for two days.” He moved past them and began sorting out the things in his bag. Will knew that Reiko typically handled the shopping, but he could see that Jason had picked out a lot of the same things she would have.

“Is she alright?” Will asked anxiously.

“No.” Jason said bluntly. “She’s having trouble balancing everything… She was working herself too hard even before…” He cast a look at Alice. “Well, recent events.”

Alice looked a little bit upset.

“It’s not your fault Alice.” Will told her gently.

“It isn’t.” Jason agreed, as he continued shuffling around with the groceries, putting them in their proper place. Alice did not respond. She simply looked down at the table.

“Maybe…” She said slowly. “I should just leave.”

Jason stopped to look at her.

“I shouldn’t be here.’ She said. “I…. I’ve been too much of a burden on you. Reiko can barely stay awake and you-“

“Alice.” Jason said firmly. “Listen to me. We’re doing this because we want to. You can stay here as long as you need to.”

Alice stared at him wide eyed, and then back to her pancakes.

“T-thank you…”

Jason straightened back up and looked at Will. “I need to talk to you. Can you leave your girlfriend alone for a bit?”

“Sure.” Will said. Alice gave a surprised MEEP sound and stared at Will in shock. “Ignore him, he’s joking.”

Will stood up and followed Jason out of the room, leaving Alice behind at the table.

Jason did not speak to him right away: They stepped through the hall and into their living room. The chess game had been nearly packed away, and the two sat in their favorite chairs.

"I've heard you had a rough night." Jason said. Will laughed humorlessly.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it."

"I've read the girl's articles." He said. "How true are they?"

"I told her everything I could." Will said. "We can't prove everything, obviously. But…"

"The coverup is becoming apparent." Jason said slowly. "They were supposed to deal with these people. They did not. And the community became aware of it when they weren't supposed to."

"What do you mean?"

"These kinds of situations are typically buried by the local media." He said. "Maybe you'll get a small blurb here or there, but it won't be big news. Maybe some low level thug will be put under arrest, but he'll be out again in a couple of months and given a full apology. The media simply hasn't been able to adapt to new technology.'

"What do you mean?"

"Every official statement they made." Jason said. "Was immediately contradicted by something you released. Last night they kept releasing statement after statement about how there is no conspiracy, about how you were making it all up, how no one matching the van's description, or the perpetrator was in the building…"

"And I gave Lysa proof of that."

"That's right." Jason said. "People were being handed evidence against their claims in real time, which caused a little bit of a stir. That girl you found… she's incredible."

Will smiled weakly. He doubted that Jason or Reiko would tolerate Lysa's disposition, when they actually met her.

“Do you want to meet her?” He asked. “I was going to bring her over and have her speak with Alice…”

“Of course!” Jason said, surprised. “Feel free to do so. As soon as possible, I think. If this keeps up we should be able to secure Alice’s future… and then maybe Reiko can get some sleep.”

“Excellent.” Will said. “I’ll go let her know today. Maybe I’ll bring her back tonight?”

“That’s a good idea. We need to strike while the iron is hot.”

“I’ll do it then.” Will said. “Tonight.”

“Excellent.” Jason said. “Try not to get into further trouble with the police.”

“Is it… Uh, public knowledge what happened last night?”

“They’re looking for you now.”

Will groaned.

“But the public is demanding you be set free. You were shot at, after all. They seem to feel like you’re a victim of excessive force.”

Will snorted. “Yeah. I am.”

“Be careful.” Jason stressed. “Go get your girlfriend, and come straight back. Don’t take any detours. Don’t give them a chance to mess with you.”

“I won’t.”

“They shouldn’t try, but you can’t be too careful with them. I think what they’re trying is to scare you off. They can’t really put you through the court system. They want as few eyes on this matter as possible.”

Will smiled. “Well, we have a different plan.”

Jason laughed. “Yes, the more people who know what’s happening here, the better.” He said. “Are you going now?”

“I better.” He said, as he got to his feet. “I imagine Lysa will want a bit of time to understand the situation fully… honestly I wish I

brought her here earlier."

"Don't think about things you should have or could have done." Jason said. "Focus on what you can do now."

Will nodded. "I will."

He stepped to the door and pressed his hand on it. "Lysa really likes expensive seafood." He said. "If you cook for her, keep that in mind."

He opened the door and stepped out into the hall. He made his way back to the kitchen where Alice lay sitting.

"Hey." He said. "I'm leaving now…. I'm going to get my reporter friend, and we'll talk some more. Does that sound good?"

Alice looked up at him, and then smiled.

"Yes."

Will smiled back, and closed the door. He stepped away and headed to the front door. He put his shoes back on and stepped out onto the world.

Since he didn't have his phone, he had no way to contact Lysa. He had not memorized her phone number. He had no choice but to head straight to her apartment and hope that she was home.

He turned and headed down the stairs to the building, and down to the street proper. He had never gone to Lysa's place from Jason's apartment, so he had to stop a minute to figure out the best way. He looked around the street and watched the people milling about, passing by each other without a glance. He didn't understand it, but it somehow made him feel sad.

Will, having figured out which direction he wanted to go in, set off. He wanted to stay away from the main road, and so stuck to the neighborhoods rather than campus proper. He kept a sharp eye out for police cars or black vans, but he saw nothing but ordinary people. Or at least, people that looked ordinary.

He would never have thought that a town like this could hide such an act. The police were complicit, at least to a degree. What did that

mean for the rest of the country? What did that mean for the people around him?

What did that mean for him?

He was so lost in his thoughts that he barely registered the police car that had stopped right in front of him.

“Freeze!”

Will stopped, surprised, as Officer Stefani leapt out of the vehicle, weapon raised, pointed right at him.

“Hello Officer.” Will said, surprised, as Stefani advanced towards him, pointing the gun right at him. He did not make any sudden moves, although he eyed Stefani rather warily.

“You’re under arrest.” She said, although he could instantly tell by her tone that her heart was not in it. Her voice sounded shaky and weak. It lacked the conviction of a real officer committing an arrest.

“Why?”

“Because… because…”

She lowered the weapon. She stared at him. She looked somehow apprehensive, somehow unsure of herself.

“What actually happened, Will?” She asked quietly. “What…”

The other police officer stepped out of the car, and she raised the gun again at him. The man walked towards Will and nodded at Stefani.

“Is this him?”

“It is.” Stefani said, her weapon still trained on him. “But-“

“I’ve got him.” The man said, as he pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“No.” Will said firmly. The man stopped.

“No?” He repeated. “Are you resisting arrest?”

“I did nothing wrong.”

“We decide-“

"We should listen to him." Stefani said, turning to him. "This situation… there's something-"

"For once in your life woman. Hold your tongue!"

"Don't speak to her like that." Will interjected, as he stepped forward. The Officer reached for his weapon, but Will was faster. He grabbed his wrist and twisted. The man cried out as the gun fell harmlessly to the ground. It thankfully did not discharge.

"And there's no need for weapons." Will said. Stefani slowly lowered the gun as she stared at Will, open mouthed. Will twisted the other Officer's arm even farther, bringing him to his knees. "Now, Officer… did you have some questions for me?"

Stefani licked her lips. "I… did." She said. "You… Will. What happened last night?"

"I attempted to expose a man who had committed a severe crime." Will said, his voice clear. "And the police protected him."

"Urgh, stop him-" The officer moaned.

People were watching them now. More than one phone was out and recording the scene. Will twisted his arm even more cruelly. "I know who the criminal is!" He said, his voice louder. "I identified him, and they did nothing!"

He looked down at the Officer. "No..." He said. "They did worse than that. They let him go."

Stefani was staring at him. She lowered her eyes, straightened herself, and holstered her weapon.

"Yes…" She said slowly. "I knew. I knew, the instant you were first brought in, that we weren't doing things by the book. There were so many signs that something had happened…"

"Stefani!" The man gasped, as he reached out to her and grabbed at her leg. Stefani made a surprised noise and moved backward. "Shut up!" He sounded frantic, unnerved. Will could not help but notice how desperate he sounded. Stefani, in contrast, sounded much more sincere and genuine. Will suspected that she, had least, had not

been in on the conspiracy. The thought made him feel somewhat more confident. He was not alone.

"We need to talk more." Will told her, urgently. Stefani nodded, biting her lip, and cast a look down at her partner.

"Please…" She said. "Could you… let him go?"

Will stared at her. And then he dropped him. The man crumped over, holding his aching arm. The crowd around him muttered as he stepped away.

"Thank you." Stefani said quietly. Will nodded at her as the man quickly reached for his pistol. Will had no choice. He leapt forward and brutally kicked at the man's back, sending him rolling across the concrete. He leaned down, grabbed the pistol, and handed it to Stefani. She took it gingerly from him.

"Will…" She said softly. "You should stop this… You're going down a dangerous path."

"The police are defending dangerous people." Will responded. "If we do nothing, who will?"

Stefani fell silent. The man behind them moaned with pain. The crowd began to circle them more closely.

"I wanted…" She said. "I wanted to help people. That's why I became a cop. That's why I want to be a lawyer. But…"

She stopped speaking. She looked at his face and then her face became hard.

"No." She said slowly. "No, you're right. I have been making excuses for myself. I have been protecting you as much as I have been able, but I see now… That will not be enough."

She turned to the man on the ground, who was trying to get to his feet, and looked down at him.

"Officer." She said formally. "I will not allow you to detain this man." She stood back up among the staring crowd and walked back to Will. She looked determined. 'I am not sure if I can tell you everything I know here, or now." She said. "But I will do everything I

can to restrain the police. Please…. Continue your work. Protect that girl and expose those who wish to bring her harm. I… I only wish I could do more."

Will stared at her. Once again he found himself taken by how beautiful she was. He smiled at her.

"You're a good woman, Officer." He said. "And thank you."

And he took off. He quickly pushed his way through the crowd, who immediately stepped out of his way, and he ran off down the street. Now he was sure of it. The police were actively after him. He couldn't say why they hadn't come for him in his bed, but they certainly were looking to bring him in again, and silence him.

They could not be allowed to do that. He would push on ahead, no matter who or what got in his way. With that thought in mind, he charged ahead, tearing through the streets at a run. Lysa. He had to reach Lysa.

He found himself outside her building, sweating a little, on the other side of the street. He looked both ways before crossing, and made his way across. He climbed the stairs, made his way to Lysa's apartment, and then knocked.

There was a loud ruffling sound on the other side of the door.

"This isn't Lysa's room!" A rather high pitched, false sounding voice said on the other side. "She moved last semester!"

"Lysa, it's me." Will said, exasperated. "Did something happen?"

There was an awkward pause, and the door opened.

"You scared me." She admitted, as she let him inside. Will was quick to notice that she looked exhausted. She was still wearing the same things she had been last night, and her hair looked rather disheveled and unkempt. And on top of everything else, her eyes looked bloodshot and red.

"Are you alright?" He asked, concerned.

"Fine… just fine!" She chirped, as she made her way back to the computer. "I'm just…. Peachy. Just peachy. Princess Peachy." She

flopped down into her chair. Will watched her, concerned. She wasn't going to be able to conduct an interview in her condition.

"Have you slept?"

"Of course not." Lysa said frantically, as she suddenly jolted forward in her seat, slamming into her computer desk. The large white coffee mug with the words I LOVE WHITE MALE TEARS emblazoned on it shook, spilling liquid all over the desk. Lysa didn't move to clear it up. "I've been dealing with these… fucking…. TROLLS!"

She looked extremely agitated and flustered. Will honestly had no idea what she was talking about.

"Trolls?"

"Plenty get imploding onto my articles telling me that I'm jumped to conclusions and that I'm completely wrong about everything." She said. "The police wouldn't LIE; they say to me. This is America! girls are not sold into sex slavery…. The patriarchy doesn't work like that they say. FUCK."

She slammed her hand against the table again and the computer rattled. Will thought it best to intervene.

"I think you need some sleep." He said urgently. 'Now." He reached forward and touched her arm. She reacted violently.

"No!" She cried, as she shook him off. "If I take a break, they'll… they'll win!" Her eyes looked up at him. "IF that happens, they'll deny that anything is wrong! I can't sleep! Not now! Not when I have more articles to-"

"You aren't well rested." Will said firmly. "I'll deal with them. I'll write an article for you, if you want. But I need you in a good condition to report on Alice."

"But-"

"The only butt I want to see is yours in bed." And with that Will dragged the chair over to her bed. Lysa squealed as he tipped the chair with his hand, throwing her across the sheets. She rolled

around, trying to get her bearings, as Will leaned down and forcefully pulled the blanket over her.

“Sleep tight.” He told her firmly. “I’ll wake you in six hours, alright?”

“But-“

“I’m here now.” Will told her, his voice gentle. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Or to Alice.”

She looked up at him. “Promise?”

He smiled down at her. “Promise.”

She seemed to have calmed down a little. She settled into the bed and closed her eyes. And within a few moments she was asleep. Will stared down at her, his affection for her growing. Despite her personality flaws, she was clearly committed to doing good. Even at the expense of her own well-being. Had he done nearly as much? He honestly hadn’t felt he had. It had been her that had exposed the conspiracy to the public. It was she that would bring about real change.

He sat down at her computer and stared at her screen. She had left it on, but he wasn’t quite sure what she had been working on. Her web browser was open on several different tabs, and several word documents seemed to be open as well. He elected not to close anything, but he had a glance through all of the pages.

There was quite a lot of information to sort through. Articles covering the incident, a twitter feed, a YouTube video, and a Facebook feed. Will decided he should respect Lysa’s privacy and avoided the twitter feed, but he did decide to look through all of the articles.

There were seven. Will was surprised. He had rather expected that Lysa would put out a single article and leave it at that. But as he clicked through them, examining the headlines, he realized that Lysa had only written three of them. The others had been handled by different writers. He passed through them, trying to decide which one to read first. They all seemed to have been published in very short order, within hours of each other. He had no idea what to make

of them. He looked through each of them. Lysa's articles were very straightforward. They explained the situation, the events, the locations, and what was happening.

But these other articles… they were published about an hour later, and seemed to go out of their way to contradict everything that Lysa established. There was no sex traffic ring, there had been no kidnapping, the event at the Museum was a big misunderstanding.

He scrolled down and noticed that Lysa had left a scathing comment in the comment section, which the author had responded to. "Your claims have been fact checked, and have been proved to be false."

The thread seemed to have continued, and the website seemed to have retracted several overly hostile comments. Will scrolled back up and scrolled through the pages. He looked through all of them and read through them again, and soon had a thorough understanding of what had happened.

Lysa had released her story. Someone released a story countering her claim, and she had spent all night sitting up and fighting back against a horde of people who were insisting that she was wrong, or even insane.

He stepped away and walked to the window. He looked down at the street below, half expecting to see a police car waiting on the street outside. He saw nothing. He turned back to the computer, thinking deeply. How exactly was the public responding to these conflicting stories? He would have to ask Lysa when she woke up.

He told Lysa that he would stay by her side until she woke up, but he was already feeling somewhat restless, and increasingly nervous. Lysa had thought it necessary to spend all night in front of the computer. He had assured her that everything would be fine but… would it really?

What followed was the longest wait he had ever had to endure. He was unwilling to leave Lysa's side for any reason. So he simply paced around her apartment, watching the hours roll by and Lysa sleep soundly on. It was agonizingly slow. There was nothing to do in the

apartment, and it was filthy to boot. Will felt a strange sense of being trapped. Still though. He couldn't go out again without Lysa, and so he waited.

It was a little over seven hours later when Lysa finally began to twitch and yawn. Will had to stop himself from leaping over to her bedside and shaking her out of her bed. She sat up, blinking tiredly, yawned, scratched herself, and then looked at him.

"Eeeeeh!"

She fell out of bed and onto the floor. Will quickly moved over to help her up. She struggled a little, clearly trying to get her bearings.

"Who let you in?"

"You did."

She stopped moving. "Oh." She said. She sat up, seemingly having calmed down. "I did, didn't I?" She looked embarrassed. "Uh, sorry about that…" Her eyes narrowed. "But what were you doing here? Watching me sleep?"

"Yes." Will said. "We need to get that interview done today, as soon as possible."

She scrunched up her nose, but nodded.

"I understand." She said. "I'm…. uh, sorry about…"

He shook his head. "It's fine." He said. "Can you come now?"

"Let me shower first. And then we'll go."

She got to her feet and made her way across the room. She turned back around and gave him a sharp glare.

"And don't you dare come in!"

The bathroom door slammed shut. Will stared at it for a moment, groaned, and sat down to wait.

He soon learned that Lysa liked very long showers. He was sitting there for another half an hour before she came out again, dressed in a bright yellow vest, bright red pants, and a rather large hat.

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Will said. “Are you?”

“Do you even need to ask?”

They headed to the door. Will turned to look at her.

“The police are after me.” He said quietly. “if we get split up-“ He told her Jason’s address. She nodded; her lips set.

“You think they’ll come after me too…?”

“Have they come for you here?”

“No!” She said. “I’ve just…. Gotten a bunch of weird messages, that’s all.” She looked rather troubled.

“We’ll deal with those once we get back.” Will promised. “Don’t worry.”

She nodded, biting her lip and staring anxiously at the door. “I need to meet her.” She said quietly. “I need to see her face to face.”

“I’ll get you there.” Will promised. “Don’t worry.” He opened the door and they stepped out. Lysa reached for her key and locked the door behind them as Will looked both ways down the hall. There was no one around.

Lysa lowered her key and stepped up behind him. Will was surprised when she grabbed on to his arm. She was shaking somewhat. She was completely terrified.

“Come on.’ Will said gently. “They live in town. It won’t be far to walk.”

“I know, but…”

“Nothing will happen to you.” Will repeated. “But hang on to me if you want, okay?”

Lysa nodded, biting her lip, and wrapped her arm even more tightly around his. They set off down the hallway and down the steps of the building.

Lysa seemed very jumpy. Her eyes jumped from person to person, as if expecting someone to jump out at her. After the scare the day before, having been attacked by Diamond Will could not blame her.

"Stay close to me." He told her.

"You don't have to tell me twice." She murmured, her eyes darting all over the street, over every single person. Although she had gotten a little sleep, she still looked a little paranoid.

Most passerby did not even give them a second glance as they passed. If they did look at them it was due to Lysa shooting them paranoid glances. They walked down the sidewalk and turned the corner.

Will didn't show it on his face, but he too was worried. If he was attacked again, by another officer or someone else, he wasn't sure what he would be able to protect Lysa and defend himself. There had been plenty of times these past few days where he had been held at gunpoint and unable to move. If someone got the drop on him now…

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you think is going to happen?" She asked. "After I interview Alice."

He thought it best to be honest. "I don't know."

She clutched his arm. "I'm scared…" She murmured. "I've never seen… I've never seen so many people rally against one of my stories before… calling me a liar, telling me I hate the police… being homophobic and misogynist towards me. I don't-"

"It's going to be fine." Will assured her. "Worry about the next article, okay? What are you going to write about?"

"I'm…. not sure. I haven't even met her yet."

They fell into silence as they walked. It began to rain around them. Neither of them were particularly bothered. It was a light, soft drizzle.

“What is she like?” Lysa asked her. “As a person, I mean?”

Will bent his head. “I’m beginning to like her a lot.” He said slowly, trying to find the words. “She was so scared and alone when I first met her, but now… I think she might be my friend.”

Lysa squeezed his arm. “You’re not like other guys, do you know that?” She asked. “No one… no one else I know would have-“

“Don’t say that.” Will said, shaking his head. ”Anyone would have done the same” Lysa kicked at his shin. He jumped in surprise.

“I mean it!” She snapped. “Honestly. Take the compliment.” She huffed and turned her head. Will turned his attention to the road, and guided her down another street.

“Most guys…” Lysa said slowly. “All they care about… is sex. You know that?”

Will said nothing. He felt they were treading on dangerous territory. In truth he didn’t feel that way at all. But Lysa keep continuing.

“I think….” She said slowly. “If it had been someone else… anyone else… that had found her. She would be in a worse position than when she started.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I do.” Lysa said, firmly. “Men are pigs.” She faltered. “Or… rather, most men. I guess. You’re okay. I think.” She squinted at him. “You are okay, right?”

“I think so.”

They looked at each other and laughed. She pressed her head against his arm, and then pulled away just as suddenly.

“What is it?”

“Nothing!” She said quickly. “I just… I don’t know.”

“If you need to talk about something-“

She shook her head. “No, forget it.”

He looked up at Jason's building. They had arrived. They had gotten there without incident.

"We're here."

She jumped up and almost took off in front of him. He had to hold her back. She stepped back rather sheepishly and gave him a cheesy smile.

"Err, which apartment is it?"

"Hold your horses and I'll walk you up there."

"I don't think the police will be waiting up here for us." She said, as they climbed the stairs. "They don't know where she is, right?"

"As far as I know." He confirmed. "Uh, you better not tell anyone."

"I won't. What do you think I am, stupid?"

They came to a stop right outside the door. Will raised his hand and knocked. He was amused to see Lysa quickly run her hand over her clothes and hair, checking for any wrinkles or blemishes.

It was Jason that answered. He looked down at them, blinking.

"You sure took your time."

"We got hung up." Will said. Lysa smiled and raised her hand. Jason's eyes ran over her. She smiled at him, a little bit awkwardly. Will noticed with amusement that he towered over her.

"Um… Hi." Lysa said. "I'm… uh, Lysa. I'm …. Uh, I'm a…" She clearly had not expected Jason to be far bigger than he was.

"I know who you are." Jason said. "I've read your articles."

"R-really?"

"Come in." He said. "She's just inside."

He stepped aside and allowed them in. He cast one look outside at the street below before shutting the door behind them.

"I was really worried." He told Will privately as Lysa walked a little bit ahead of them, eyeing the décor with what seemed like a somewhat critical eye. "I should have gone with you. What took you so long?"

“She had been up all night.” Will told him quietly, as she cast a curious look behind them.

“Uh, where am I going exactly?” She asked. She sounded somewhat more aggressive than what was probably necessary. Jason didn’t miss a beat.

“To your left.” He said, pointing. Lysa nodded and turned back around and entered the room.

“A handful, is she?” Jason asked him. Will groaned.

“You have no idea.”

They followed her into the room. Reiko was sitting on her chair, newspaper in hand. She looked somewhat uneasy, but smiled when she saw Will. Alice was sitting on the couch by herself, her hands folded in front of her. She, too, looked somewhat uneasy. Only Lysa seemed chipper.

“Hello hello.” She said brightly. “Umm… nice to meet you. I’m Lysa, I’ve been covering your… I mean, I’ve been covering Will’s side of the story, and I wanted to… Uh, I mean…”

She looked kind of flustered. She was looking between Reiko and Alice, and Will suddenly realized that she was not quite sure which was which.

“Lysa, this is Reiko.” He said. “She’s this guy’s wife.” He poked Jason with his elbow. “They’ve been helping me look after her.”

“Oh…” She breathed, looking somewhat relieved at his save. “Ummm… it’s nice to meet you. Uh, all of you…”

She smiled, but Will sensed a strong sense of awkward unease in the air. He wasn’t quite sure what was making her so nervous, but he suspected that it might have something to do with being around people she did not know.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Reiko asked politely, gesturing to the chair. A large, comfortable chair that had typically been reserved for guests had been moved to be right in front of Alice. Lysa smiled,

somewhat nervously, and stepped forward. She sat down, reached into her bag, and pulled out a tablet.

"I'd like to record this." She said. "Does everyone…. I mean, does anyone have any objection to that?"

"None." Reiko answered promptly.

"I'll hold it for you." Jason said, moving forward. "You just press the red button and record, right?"

She shirked away from him as his hand reached out to her. She cast a worried look at Reiko who gave her a blank look.

"I… yes." She said, as she handed over the tablet. "It should have plenty of memory but let me know if it stops suddenly, okay?"

Jason nodded and stepped away.

"It's recording."

"So soon?" Lysa balked. She adjusted herself a bit, stiffened, and then smiled at Alice. Alice stared back. Will, on impulse, moved over and sat beside her. She didn't move, but she looked almost as if she were going to jump out of the chair.

"Will, you can wait your turn." Lysa said, annoyed.

"You're making her uncomfortable." Will told her. "Isn't that right, Alice?"

Alice bent her head and cast her eyes downward. There was a very awkward pause.

"I'm sorry." Lysa said quietly. "I didn't mean… I mean, I don't…" She struggled to find the words. She tapped her pen against the side of the chair before glancing back at Jason. Will imagined she was strongly considering asking him to stop recording. But instead she turned back around and faced Alice.

"So." She said. "My name is Lysa James. I'm a reporter for the… Well, I'm going to be a reporter. After I graduate school. And… you are?"

Alice turned her head away, towards Will. He nodded at her encouragingly. She raised her head again and looked straight forward.

"I am Alice." She said.

"Alice." Lysa repeated. "I've heard a lot about you, Alice. From our mutual friend Will Wei." She waved her arm at Will absentmindedly, and Will winced. He did not like the idea of being called out by name, on air. "And he's told me some things. Things that shocked and rocked me to my core. Things that I could scarcely even comprehend or understand, like pineapple on pizza. Or liking DC over Marvel."

Alice was staring at her completely stony faced, but Reiko was staring at Lysa rather incredulously. Lysa smiled. It was a rather forced smile. Will was beginning to feel that when it came to interviewing subjects, particularly about sensitive situations like this, Lysa had no experience at all. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing. Perhaps that was to be expected. She was still in school, after all.

"I scarcely believed half of the things I heard, at first." Lysa went on. "I thought that Will was lying to me. I thought that it could be a prank, or a joke. I never once thought that women like you were being sex trafficked into our city, onto our university campus."

Alice looked up. She looked shocked and appalled. She looked hurt and angry. Lysa nodded sympathetically.

"I wanted to talk to you." Lysa said slowly. "To try and understand who you are, and who you came from. A lot of people are saying that you aren't real, that sex trafficking doesn't happen here, that this could never happen in America. But I believe that you… your situation is something that simply should never happen."

She finished her little speech and stopped. For a moment Will could see plain on her face how distressed and agitated she was. She was terrified that she would offend or said something improper.

Alice merely clenched her hands. She did not answer. Lysa stared at her. She seemed at a complete loss at where to go next. Will needed to push things along.

"Alice." Will said quietly. "I'm here. Talk to her as you would me. Tell her about what's happened to you."

Alice unclenched her hands and looked at him. She looked completely lost.

"Perhaps I should start." Will said. "But Alice… there are parts of your story that even I don't know."

He looked towards Lysa and nodded at her.

"My name is Will Wei." He said. "I first met Alice when she leapt out of a moving van. She had been tied up- completely restrained. When I stopped to help her, the men in the vehicle tried to drive me away and grab her again. I fought them off, and got her out of there."

Alice was nodding along with this.

"Yes…" She said slowly. "That's it. That's what happened." Her eyes fell on Lysa.

"For as long as I can remember." She began. "I have been used in this way. I have been sent to clients all over the world."

"What is the purpose of sending you to these places?"

"So they can have sex with me."

She said it so matter of factly that it was off putting. Reiko looked horrified, and even Lysa seemed taken aback.

"I…. see." Lysa said. "And… this wasn't your choice? I mean to say, this isn't a career you-"

"No." Alice said, her voice quiet. "I could not eat what I liked, or go where I pleased, or speak to people that I wasn't supposed to be speak to. I exist for one purpose, and if I ever failed in that purpose…"

Her voice trailed off. Will recalled how she had told him how girls that did not perform satisfactorily suddenly disappeared into thin air,

as if they had never existed. A fresh surge of anger welled up within him.

“Why did you decide to run away?” Lysa asked. “Is it something you thought about for a long time, or…?”

Alice closed her eyes and bent her head upward.

“The man I was supposed to… supposed to marry.” She said. “He sent me away. He refused to even touch me. He called me impure…”

“Impure?” Lysa repeated. “Does that mean he wanted a virgin, or….?” She stopped speaking. Alice continued.

“I was not restrained properly.” She said. “As carefully as I should have been. I was barely untied for him before he demanded that I go back. I…. did not suit his requirements, for a wife.”

“Wife.” Lysa repeated. “So… you don’t just do sex work? Is it like… a mail order bride thing?”

Will had been wondering about that himself.

“I am too old to be considered for sex work.” She said promptly. “Anywhere in the world. So I was just sold off.”

“Too old?” Lysa repeated. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

The entire room fell silent. They all stared at her, aghast. She seemed aware that something was wrong and adjusted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Seventeen?” Lysa repeated. “Too old… so that means…”

“Child trafficking.” Will finished. “Yes.”

Lysa let out a frustrated hiss of air. The pen in her hand looked as if it might snap in two.

“How… long were you…. uh, a working girl?” She asked, trying to keep her anger out of her voice.

Alice did not speak at first. She sat there; her hands folded in front of her.

“A long time.” She whispered. “Longer than I can remember.”

They again fell into that shocked silence. Will could scarcely imagine. How far did his own memories go back? He almost felt like he could recall moments from two or three years old, although he wasn’t quite sure. Had Alice… had she really been working since that age?

No… this wasn’t work. It was slavery. Will felt his hand clench into a fist.

“A long time.” Lysa repeated. She too, seemed to be somewhat rattled. “And… you… hated this?”

Alice looked up at her. Lysa seemed almost to shirk back from the intense fire that seemed to have welled up within her.

“More than anything.” Alice whispered, her voice venomous. Lysa nodded, her lips pursed.

“Well, you’re safe now.” She said. “Ummm… but I have to know….”

She gestured around. “Why here?” She asked. “Why not go to the police? Will told me that you didn’t want….”

Alice sighed.

“The police.” She said. “Are simply tools for them. A girl who would run away would be found and dragged back by local authorities within hours, in most cases.”

“All Cops Are Bastards.” Lysa said derisively. She looked positively disgusted. “You… you’ve been wanting to get away from them for a long time, haven’t you?”

Alice nodded.

“I can see why.” Lysa spat. She seemed unable to control herself. “Those fucking… Uh, excuse me.” She turning pink. “Alice, I promise you. I am going to get to the bottom of this. I’m going to find these people and ruin them! Do you hear me?”

Alice looked shocked to hear this. Will could see why. He could not imagine Jason, Reiko, or himself reacting in this way. It was a typical

Lysa overreaction, but in this one specific instance it felt completely warranted.

“I feel the same way.” He told Lysa, his voice hard. “These people need to answer for what they’ve done.”

Alice looked as if she didn’t know what to say. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her pant legs, unable to meet their eyes.

“You… shouldn’t.,..” She whispered. “No… if you do they will…”

“Try to hurt us?” Will asked. “Let them try.”

Alice stared at him. She raised a hand to her eyes and wiped at her face. Will could see little tears running down her face. He reached out and brushed his hand against hers. She froze, shocked. He smiled at her.

“It’ll be fine.” He said. “I won’t let them hurt you. I promise.”

“Promise…?” Alice whispered. Suddenly she seemed a lot more sure of herself.

“I believe you.” She said. “All of you. You have all done so much for me, and I… would be lost without you.” She bent her head. “Thank you.”

“What?” Lysa repeated, surprised. “But I haven’t done anything!”

Everyone cast her a look, and the entire room burst into laughter.

“I mean, that is to say…” Lysa stammered, suddenly looking very uncomfortable. “I… Uh, I mean, Alice…. I want to help you, but I… Uh… haven’t done all that much, yet.”

“That isn’t true.” Reiko interjected, as she held out the paper she had been looking at when they entered the room. “They tried to downplay your article in the paper. They tried to say you were misinformed and didn’t fully understand the case. But no one bought it because you spent all night arguing with people about it.”

“In a way.” Jason said. “You’ve done more than any of us. We’ve protected Alice, but you’re the one who is going to help keep her safe.”

“R-really?” Lysa looked between all of them, shocked beyond words. “I… thank you! Thank you so much!”

“I think that’s enough for now.” Will interjected. “How about we take a little break?” He was looking at Alice, and she seemed to be overcome with emotion. She probably wouldn’t be answer any questions, in her state.

“Ooooh, we can talk about what we want to discuss next over dinner.” Lysa said. “Hey, guy. Give me my tablet.”

“Give me my tablet please.” Jason said. Lysa scowled at him. He held it up above her head and she stood up, trying to grab at it.

“Come on!” She whined. “I need to check the footage! You did hit record, right?”

“Why won’t you say the magic word?” Jason asked. Reiko groaned, but she was smiling.

“Stop antagonizing her, Jason.” She said.

“Yeah, do as your wife says!” Lysa snapped. “Give it back!”

Will rolled his eyes and turned to Alice. She seemed rather surprised at the rather change of mood, but somehow pleased too. This was just what she needed. A brief distraction, before the conversation continued.

“Did you even record it properly?” Lysa demanded. “Let me see it-“ She paused. “Pretty please with ice cream on top?”

“Good girl.” Jason handed her the tablet.

“Jackass.” Lysa said to him, as she looked at the tablet. She checked the recording, and satisfied that everything had been captured, began playing around with it.

“In a couple of minutes that will be live.” Lysa announced. “Hopefully that will get some people talking.”

“That soon?” Reiko asked, surprised. “No editing or anything?”

Lysa shrugged. “I thought it was fine.” She said airily. “Besides a lot of people were saying that I was lying or making things up.

Showing unedited footage should help with that."

Reiko pursed her lips and cast a look at Jason.

"I don't know…" She said slowly. "Do you think it's a good idea… Jason?"

Jason shook his head.

"Not sure." He said. "But we can't do nothing. We need to put something out there."

Reiko still looked troubled. She took her newspaper and stood up.

"Well I suppose it can't be helped. "So dinner, then?"

"Yes please." Lysa said instantly. "I'm starving… I haven't eaten all day…" She laughed, and then stopped just as suddenly. There was a very awkward pause.

"Wait here." Reiko said. She left the room. Will watched her go, and then looked back at Jason.

"What's got into her?"

"Worried." Jason said. "She doesn't like the way the media has been covering this…. It's very worrisome."

"How so?"

"They're jumping to extremes." Jason explained. "They're trying anything they can to convince the public is nothing wrong, when plenty of people have been witness to the contrary. They're keeping a lid on it for now, but just barely."

"But what does that-"

"Reiko thinks they're going to turn really nasty." He said. "Lysa, I would be very concerned if I was you."

Lysa laughed. Will had heard her laugh enough times to know that she was faking it.

"Me, worried?" She asked. "No no no. I'm not worried."

"Lysa." Will said. "You can trust him, okay?"

Lysa deflated.

“I’m so fucking scared.” She said. “And worried and…. And angry. I can barely think straight, let alone conduct an interview.”

“You did fine.” Jason said. Lysa shook her head. Jason considered her for a moment for speaking again. “Look, you’ve seen the lengths that they’re willing to go to prevent people from asking questions. Don’t be worried about your coverage of the situation. You need to consider yourself in very real danger.”

Lysa shuddered. “Danger…?” She repeated. “Uh… you don’t think that I’ll… be kidnapped and taken away like Alice, do you?”

She sounded anxious. She clearly had been considering the possibility for some time. Jason thought about the question, eyeing her warily.

“Well…” He said slowly. “Alice? What do you think?”

Alice was still sitting down on the couch. She looked up at him. Her lips twitched, and then she answered.

“I’ve never heard of that happening…” She said slowly. “Everyone I knew…. Well, we’re trained and prepared from a young age for our services. I mean, you’re past your prime, right?”

Lysa bristled. “Excuse me?” She asked. “Past my prime? I’m-“

“Lysa, calm down.” Will said. “We’re dealing with a child sex ring here. Of course they’re not going to want legal age women.”

Lysa huffed and turned away form her irritably.

“Well then how are they going to hurt me?”

“Probably impact your life and career opportunities.” Jason said. “I wish you had come to us first. You should have published the articles anonymously….”

“It was my established following that got this story off the ground!” Lysa snapped.

“Lysa, shut up and be nice.” Will told her. She stared at him, her mouth open. She closed it again. She seemed too shocked to speak.

Jason continued as if Will had not spoken.. “You need to understand that you’re in danger.” He said slowly. “You may not understand the risks. You need to think about how best to protect yourself.”

“If I’m not going to be captured and raped, I’m not too concerned.” She said. “What else could they do to me?”

“You’ve very brave.” Jason said. “But I think-“

“I don’t need your advice.” Lysa snapped. “I don’t your help, or protection… I’m doing just fine on my own!”

She turned and walked out of the room. She stomped outside the hallway and appeared to walk towards the front door.

Will and Jason stared.

“What was that about-“

“I’ll go get her.” Will said quickly. “We’ll be right back.”

He hurriedly stepped out after her and caught up with her as she halfway through the front door.

“I’m not staying.” She snapped.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Will suggested. She stopped. She considered him for a moment, and then nodded.

“Alright.” She said. “But I’m not talking to you. You told me to shut up.”

“You deserved it.”

She turned away from him and tried to slam the door in his face. He caught it before it could and stepped out after her. They headed off down the steps.

“I did not.”

“You were way out of line.” Will said. “There was no reason to go off on him like that.”

Lysa huffed and turned her head away from him. “He shouldn’t have been talking down to me.” She said. “There’s nothing to be scared of, right?”

“He was trying to-“

“Look.” Lysa said, as they came to the bottom of the stairs. She turned around to face him and glowered. “I don’t need men telling me what to do or say. I’ll do what I want, and that’s that. History Seldom Remembers Well Behaved Women.”

She spoke as if she were saying something deep and profound.

“You’re being an idiot.” Will told her flatly. She recoiled, surprised, and glared at him.

“Listen here-“

“We’re NOT.” Will continued, raising his voice. “Going to protect Alice if we’re fighting about things like this.”

Lysa looked even angrier.

“What are you so angry about, anyway?” Will asked. Lysa turned away from him again, and started off down the road. Will caught up alongside her quickly.

“Leave me alone.”

“Lysa-“

“You’ll just call me stupid again.”

“I won’t do that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, I promise to listen before I do.”

Lysa let out a short laugh. “At least you’re honest.”

She fell silent. She seemed to be trying to decide what to say.

“I…” She began, hesitated, and downcast her eyes. “I felt uncomfortable, in there.” She said. “With them watching me.”

“Really?” Will was surprised. She was so outspoken about so many of her other opinions that Will hadn’t realized that. “Why didn’t you say something?”

She huffed. “I… didn’t want to…” She shook her head. “Forget it.” She said. “I can’t explain.”

“But why lash out like that?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Because he was making me uncomfortable.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.” They came to the end of the street and turned down another one.

“Were you… scared of him?” Will asked. Lysa turned to look at him sharply. He could tell right away that he was completely correct.

“I was.” She said. She wasn’t meeting his eye now. “When he answered the door I just sort of…. I didn’t know what to do.”

“He wasn’t going to hurt you, Lysa.” Will said. Lysa shook her head.

“I couldn’t know that.” She said. “I… barely know you. I was walking into a home with no idea what was about to happen. I was on edge and I-“

“But what does this have to do with freaking out at him?” Will interrupted. “He did nothing to you.”

She looked up at him, her eyes blazing. “I was SCARED-“

“Deal with it!” Will snapped. She pulled back, surprised. “Look.” He said, in a more normal tone. “I get that you’re scared. We all are. But you can’t just explode at people for no reason.”

Lysa snorted. “Look who’s talking.”

“You actually deserve it.” Will said. She shot him a dirty look, but he ignored her. “You’ve been nothing but rude since we met. You need to straighten yourself out.”

“You’ve never said anything about it before.” She said sullenly.

“Because I needed your help.” Will said. “But your attitude it is becoming a problem. You need to control yourself.”

Lysa shook her head. “You sound like my dad.” She said. She sounded bitter.

“Your Dad?”

“Yeah.” She said. “Don’t stay out late, don’t dress a certain way, don’t talk back, no guy will want to marry you.” She giggled. “Asshole.”

“I’m not telling you to do that.” Will said. “I just-“

“It’s the same thing.” Lysa said, exasperatedly. “I don’t need to be protected by men. I can take care of myself. I don’t need to be told to stay safe. I don’t-“ She seemed about as if she were about to start rambling. Will needed to cut her off. It didn’t escape his attention that he had rescued her just the night before, but he thought it wouldn’t be prudent to bring that up right now.

“You know.” He said. “I don’t like my Dad either.”

Lysa stopped talking. “Huh?” She blinked at him. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Will said. “He didn’t like that I didn’t revolve my entire life around school. He thinks learning how to fight was a waste of my time.”

“What?” Lysa looked taken aback. “But you’re so…. You’re so good at it.”

“Dad didn’t think it would make me any money.” He said. “That was always his thing. You need to be a scientist, you need to build robots, you need to be a lawyer, you need to be a politician, you need to be successful. And Mom would agree with him.”

He smiled to himself. “It was so frustrating.” He said. “I was doing all of these cool things, these things that no one else I knew could or would do, but my parents tried hard to shut it down. They tried bullying me, cutting my allowance, controlling where I went and when, what courses I would take. But I still did what I wanted to do.”

Lysa looked shocked. She didn’t seem to know what to say.

“You know.” Will said. “I hated them. But they were just trying to put me down a good path.”

Lysa snorted and turned away from him.

“Well, you’re a guy.” She said. “Girls… well, girls are controlled by all facets of society. Girls are taught they have no agency. They have no power, the men in their lives do. Look at Alice. Look what society has done to her.”

Will stopped. Lysa turned around to look at him.

“Alice is why we need to do this.” Will said. “You wanted to help her before you even knew who she was. You can’t let your feelings get in the way of saving her.”

Lysa let out a muffled sound that might have been words, but Will could not make it out.

“We need to stick together.” Will told her. “Please, Lysa. We need you more than anyone. You can’t bail on us. You can’t abandon Alice.”

Lysa was staring at him.

“Will…” She said slowly. “I… thank you. You’re right.”

She took a couple of steps, forward, hesitated, and turned back around to face him. She looked guilty. “Do you think… Jason is going to be angry with me?”

“No.” Will said. “I want you to apologize, but I want us to keep moving ahead. We have a lot of work to do.”

He smiled. “This isn’t going to be easy, but it’s the right thing to do.”

Lysa took a deep breath and stepped forward, and then stopped.

“I… I’ve always been like this.” She said. “I’m not sure… If I could….”

“You can.” Will said. “Come on.”

He headed off back to the building. When he looked back Lysa was hot on his heels.

They returned to the building in silence and knocked at the door. It was Reiko that answered this time.

“Oh.” She said. “It’s you.” She sounded more displeased to see them than Will had expected. Jason had likely told her what had just happened.

“Um. Hello again.” Lysa said. “Uh, sorry for walking out on you. My legs were hurting, and I needed to stretch them a little.”

“I asked you to wait.” Reiko said. “Will, you shouldn’t be walking around outside. Come in.”

They stepped inside the apartment and walked inside. Will could see that Lysa was biting her lip. Clearly, she was a little bit annoyed at Reiko’s abrasiveness. Will knew Reiko very well, and understood her perspective, but he could not but admire Lysa’s restraint. She was trying to do better.

They entered into the kitchen. The table, which had been made for four, had an extra chair that didn’t match the others awkwardly shoved in between two others.

“I’m sitting there.” Reiko said. “I’m smallest.”

“You are not.” Lysa said immediately. “I’m smaller.” She spoke as if she were very proud of this fact. Will looked in between the two of them. He hadn’t quite noticed it before, but Reiko seemed to have gained a little weight. As they were about the same height, Lysa was smaller.

He thought it would be rude of him to point it out, but he could see that Reiko was about to make an angry retort.

“She wants to sit next to her husband, I’m sure.” Will said, amused. “The closer the better.”

Reiko’s laughed and turned away. Lysa smiled at him as well before taking her own seat. He sat next to her. Alice was already sitting on his other side. She looked up at him and smiled as he sat down. Lysa leaned over him.

“Hi Alice!” She chirped. “Um. Are you feeling any better?”

Alice nodded at her. Lysa smiled and leaned back in her seat. In front of them Jason and Reiko were getting out plates. Will had a look at the spread. It looked as if Jason and Reiko had both contributed to the cooking. There were a lot of the meats that Jason favored alongside some of the recipes that Reiko liked to make.

“Ooooooh.” Lysa said, eyeing the food with longing. “That looks so good!”

“Uh, thank you.” Reiko said, taken aback. She gave Will a confused look. Will shook his head. Lysa, it seemed, was someone you just had to get used to being around.

“Hm.” Lysa said, as she eyed the seafood with a critical eye. “I had a really good crab recently. I wonder how this will compare…?”

“Oh yeah, about that crab-“ Will began, as Lysa leaned forward and took a plate from Reiko. Reiko moved past her to hand another plate to Will, and then another to Lysa, before moving back to the stove.

“Anyway.” Lysa said. “Uh, Alice. What did you think about the interview? Did I do a good job?”

“Huh?” Alice faltered. “Wh.. how would I know?”

“I just wanted your opinion.” Lysa told her, as Reiko came back around with a bowl.

“We’re setting the food on the counter.” She told Will. “So if you want seconds…”

“Thank you.” Will told her, as she moved past him.

“I thought… it was fine.” Alice said uncertainly. “Umm… Will…? What did you think?” She looked anxious.

“I thought it went well.” Will said. “You both did great.”

Lysa preened. “You think so?”

“You think so?” Alice repeated, in a much more doubtful tone.

“Yeah.” Will told her. “I wouldn’t lie to you, Alice.”

“That’s right.” Lysa said, nodding. “Will isn’t like other guys.”

He was about to turn around and ask her what that was supposed to mean, but Reiko came back before he could manage it.

“Alright, who’s first?”

“Oh, oh! Me me!” Lysa leapt up with her plate and headed off to the counter, where a large spread of food lay waiting. Will looked back at

Alice.

“Ready to eat?”

She nodded, and they stood up together. Will walked up behind Lysa and observed the spread.

“Oooooh, it all looks so good.” Lysa said enthusiastically, as he eyes roamed across her options. She took some crab, some mashed potatoes, and some corn and stepped away with a smile. Will and Alice followed suit. Lysa, Will noted, ate a lot more than a girl her size probably would. Alice was a lot taller than her, but ate comparatively less.

“Have you eaten already?” Will asked her, as she took a small scoop of potatoes and gently set them onto her plate.

“Oh-“ She looked up at him. “No… I haven’t.”

“Hm.” He gave her plate another discerning look. She didn’t look starved. If anything she looked rather healthy. He decided not to say anything more about it and walked back to his seat. Alice soon followed suit.

Lysa had not waited for them. She was already sampling her food with gusto.

“Mmmm. This is good.” She said. “Um, could someone get me a glass of water?” Jason was about to sit down, but he sidestepped to the glass cabinet, opened it with one hand, brought out a glass, pushed it under the faucet in the sink, filled it up, and handed it to her in a matter of moments.

“Woah.” Lysa said, impressed. “You should have been a waiter. I’d tip you twenty bucks for that.”

Jason grinned at her as set down at his place. Reiko looked down at his plate, frowning. She said something to him, what it was Will couldn’t make out. He nodded faintly, as he pressed his fork into his plate.

“So.” Lysa said. “Will.”

Will looked up from his plate. He had not had the chance to eat at all yet today, and was kind of eager to dig in.

"Yeah?"

"What's our next move?"

Jason and Reiko stopped their quiet discussion to look up at them.

"I… I'm not sure yet." Will admitted. "Do you…. do you have any idea?"

'Well, I want to conduct more interviews, obviously." She said airily. "And get a more clear idea of Alice's background and who her captors were. But… well… maybe I want to know what you think."

"What I think?" Will asked. "I'm just trying not to get arrested."

"You can stay here Will." Reiko said immediately. "If you need to get out of the house-"

"Thanks." Will said. "I might do that." Jason leaned forward.

"I would advise against doing anything at all, Will." He said. "You've done enough. People are asking questions. The police released a station that they're investigating the situation."

"Yeah, investigating ME."

Jason laughed. "Well, true." He said. "I imagine they tried to pin something on you, but with the way they were acting…"

"Lots of people saw the way they treated you when you showed up at the museum." Reiko said. "It was recorded and everything. You told the officer very clearly what had happened, and when they came after you…"

"People there were sympathetic." Jason said. "They really do think that something is up. Lysa, how many views have you gotten on that video?"

Lysa looked startled at being addressed out of the blue. "Um, I haven't checked. Here, let me-"

"Can't it wait until after dinner?" Reiko interrupted, looking between the two of them. "We have a House Rule. No screens at dinner."

“No screens?” Lysa repeated. “Why?”

“If you’re on a screen during dinner with other people.” Jason said. “You have an addiction.”

“What? I do not!” She sounded defensive. Will had the rather strong impression that her Father had said something very similar to her. “What if I get a phone call? What if… my cat is dying, and I need to rush home to be with her?”

“It can wait until after dinner.” Reiko said immediately.

Lysa looked so appalled by this that Will, Jason, and Reiko all burst into laughter. Lysa turned somewhat pink.

“Stop it!” She cried, shaking her head. “It’s not FUNNY.” She seemed very distressed by the teasing. The laughter subsided into an awkward silence. There was no humor in teasing someone who couldn’t see the humor in a joke.

“Will.” Jason said, breaking the silence. “I do think things are looking up. Lysa got the public involved and interested. They’re asking questions. It shouldn’t be too much longer now. I don’t think you should go back to the exhibit or deal with Diamond again.”

“Too much longer? Until what?”

“Until Alice is safe.” Reiko responded, smiling. “If we can put a big spotlight on her and her case, they wouldn’t dare touch her. A few more days just like this and I’m sure someone we can trust will take her in.”

“Um.’

They turned to Alice.

“I…. I am safe.” She said. She placed her hand in her heart and trailed her eyes across all of them. “I… want to stay here.” She said. “With…. With all of you.”

Reiko sighed.

“Alice….” She said slowly. “We… would love to keep you here. We would. But it’s been... Well…”

Will knew what she wanted to say. The sleepless nights, the uncertainty, the worry, the extra effort. As much as Reiko and Jason had done for Alice, they wanted her to leave. Not because they didn't care about her: But because they wanted her to be somewhere that could actually provide for her needs.

"Alice." Jason said. "We can't look after you forever. You can't spend the rest of your life with us. You're going to have to figure out for yourself where you want to go-"

"I want to stay here." Alice said. "Please… I… I don't have anywhere to go." She seemed almost as if she would break out into tears.

There was a very awkward pause No one seemed to know what to say.

"Alice." Jason said, his voice firm. "You are welcome to stay here for as long as you need to. We are not going to throw you out or send you back to where you came from. We do care about you a lot. But you cannot stay with us forever. You need to live your own life."

Reiko looked extremely uncomfortable at this, as if she was expecting Alice to react poorly. But instead it was Lysa who piped up.

"Alice, life will get better from here." She said. "You got out from those people who were fucking with you, right? And now you're happier than ever. Once your life gets back on track, you'll meet people like this all the time."

"You think so…?"

Lysa smiled widely. "I KNOW so." She said. "You're a free woman and can make your own decisions."

Alice smiled and stared down at the table. "Free…." She whispered.

"That's right, Alice." Reiko said. "Freedom. That's what we want for you. We want you to be able to decide for yourself where you want to go next. And… we'll always be there for you. As your friends."

The entire table echoed this sentiment. Alice's eyes began to look rather watery.

“Thank you…” She whispered. “I…. understand….” She swallowed, clearly trying to hold back her tears.

“It’s not going to be easy.” Jason warned her. “But you’re going to have to learn how to live your own life. But in a way that’s sort of what you needed more than anything. You need a place to call you own.”

Alice nodded, but she seemed a little bit overwhelmed.

“We’ll help you find whatever you’re looking for, Alice.” Will said. “I promise.” Behind him Lysa was twitching about in her seat.

“I’ll write an article about it!” Lysa burst out. “I’ll… I’ll find someone who can help! Count on it!”

And in a flash she had stood up and ran off into the hallway.

The group stared at her. Reiko sighed, shaking her head.

“The girl is insane, Will.” She told him gloomily. “Did you notice?”

“How could I not notice?” Will asked. “But she’s a help, isn’t she?”

“Is she?” Reiko sounded doubtful. “She seems like a complete ditz.”

Alice looked up at her, seemingly rather taken aback. Will sighed.

“I know what you mean.” She said. “She’s a handful alright. But she has been a big help.”

“She’s not being invited back here, that’s for sure.” Reiko sniffed. “I hope this business is resolved with shortly…”

Will had not seen her so irritable in a very long time. This was unlike her. The lack of sleep and pressure, coupled with Lysa being admittedly unbearably annoying, was probably a bit too much to handle.

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” Will suggested. “You don’t’ seem like yourself.”

“Maybe I will.” Reiko said, sighing. “I-“

She was cut off when Lysa came bursting back into the room.

“Will Will Will Will Will Will Will!” She spoke rapidly, so frantically that Will barely registered that she was repeating his name over and over again.

“Wha-“

“Look!”

She shoved the tablet into his face. Will blinked at it, not entirely sure what he was looking at.

“100,000 views.” She breathed. “In an hour.” Will looked at it more closely, and realized that he was looking at their video. The view count was just as she said. Will wasn’t sure to make of it.

She seemed incredibly pleased with herself. Will gave her a confused look.

“Is that good?”

“Good?” She repeated. “Will, that’s excellent. That’s viral. It’ll be a national story in no time.”

She seemed incredibly pleased with herself. “Here, let me read some of these comments…”

She stepped back and held the tablet in front of her. The group stared up at her expectantly.

“I was there, there is a massive cover up from the police…”

“There’s something weird about this place.”

“This Will guy is hot as fuck…” Lysa stopped, blushing a little.

Jason laughed as Will went red. Reiko giggled. Lysa adjusted herself and continued reading.

“I’m not sure what to believe….”

“Pretty girls! Who is the Hapa in the back?”

Reiko suddenly stopped laughing. Jason looked somewhat angry.

‘Ummm…” Lysa scrolled through some more of them. “Poor girl… We need to protect her smile bros… We need to do something…”

She looked up at them, her eyes shining. “We have support.” She said, beaming brightly. “People believe us!”

The news had come so suddenly that Will was barely able to process it. He stood staring at an equally looking shocked Jason and Reiko.

“We’re…”

“We’re going viral!” Lysa cried, and began to flail her arms around the room in an awkward kind of dance. She shook her body all around, laughing, and ignored their requests to stop and explain what had just happened.

Finally, she seemed to catch on.

“What?” She asked. “You don’t want to dance?”

“Lysa, did the video do well?”

“It did very well.” She repeated. She seemed to have calmed down enough to register that the others didn’t know what to make of the news.

“Ugh.” She said. “Don’t tell me you’re all a bunch of boomers?”

“We’re not studying journalism, Lysa.”

“Anyone could tell you how big viral videos are.” She snapped. “This could get millions of views, and even reuploaded on other channels.”

“The more views it gets…”

“The more support we get.” Lysa said. “I’m thinking we could set up a crowdfunding campaign, or start asking for help-“

“Let’s hold off on that.” Reiko said quickly. “We don’t need money. We just need to keep her safe.”

Lysa frowned. “People ask for money for charity all the time.”

“Yes, well…” Reiko said, unsure of how to put her thoughts into words. “People might get the wrong idea if we start something like that. They may just think it’s a scheme to make money.”

“But money could help Alice.”

“She’s being well taken care of.” Jason interrupted. “Let’s save the fundraising until after the public starts demanding it.”

Lysa pursed her lips. “There’s nothing wrong with charity, you know-“

“It’s not a bad idea, Lysa.” Will interrupted. “But let’s focus on one thing at a time. Keeping the momentum going.”

Jason nodded. “I agree.”

Reiko was quick to agree as well. Lysa groaned.

“I get it, I have nothing but bad ideas, I know-“

“No one’s saying that.” Will said quickly. “Right?” He looked towards Jason and Reiko for support.

They stayed rather silent. They didn’t answer. It was an awkward kind of silence. They did think that Lysa had a lot of bad ideas, but didn’t want to admit it right in front of her.

“I’m just saying.” Lysa said. “If you were to just be…. Handed a million dolllars, all your problems would vanish overnight.”

She looked back down at her tablet. “Regardless, though, I think these numbers are going to just go up. And if that happens…” She shuddered with delight.

They finished up the remains of their meal and handed in the plates.

“I think I’ll come back tomorrow.” Lysa said, looking around the kitchen with interest. “Alice, I want you to think deeply about what you want to talk about tomorrow, okay?”

Alice nodded. Lysa smiled widely at her.

“Good girl.” Lysa said affectionately. “Stay safe, alright?” She made her way over to Will, who was standing off to the side. “And you get to keep ME safe.” She said. “Walk me home.”

“Hey wait-“

She turned and strode out of the room. Will groaned, rolling his eyes at Reiko and Jason. Reiko giggled.

“She has you wrapped around her finger!”

“As if.” Will said. His eyes fell on Alice and he felt a strong urge to talk to her again, to let her know that he would be there for her. But they had spent so much time together already that he felt that nothing needed to be said.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow, then.” Will said. “Good bye.”

He found Lysa standing in the hallway. Her tablet had been slid back into its bag as she was putting on all of her things.

“Are you sure you can’t make your way back on your own?”

“Nonsense, I have no idea where we are.” She said promptly, as she opened the door. “You’re going to have to walk my back tomorrow as well.”

“Great.” Will said sarcastically, as they stepped through the door. “And risk more police encounters?”

“You could always just stay at my place.” Lysa told him innocently. Will started at her. She blushed and then looked away quickly.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She said. “Honest.”

“I know.”

“I like girls.”

“I KNOW.”

“I’m just worried about you.” Lysa said. “I mean… they’re looking for you. What are they going to do if they get a hold of you?” Will turned his head down.

“I don’t know.”

Lysa stared at him, worry clear in her face. “Will.” She said slowly. “If you keep doing this… if you keep putting yourself at risk… if you keep getting guns point at you… eventually you’re going to-“

“I know.” Will said, his voice heavy. “I know I could die, but… that doesn’t seem very important right now.” He looked upward at the sky. He could make out the moon shining right overhead, and his gaze fixated on it. “I can’t just sit around and do nothing. I can’t just

stand by and let Alice this situation be brushed under the rug. I need to see this through to the end."

Lysa smiled at him. She reached up and punched his arm.

"You've got balls, kid." She said, imitating a deep, masculine tone.

He stared at her. "Kid?" He repeated.

"Kiddo."

"I'm like twice your size."

"So?"

They stared at each other, feigning indignation, before breaking down into laughter.

"But really, Will." Lysa said. "I… I don't think I've ever met anyone as brave as you. Most of the guys around here spend all of their time drinking and trying to get laid. You're really something else."

"You think so?" Will asked, surprised. "I don't think so."

"I do." Lysa said, firmly. "You're doing something great. I know it."

She paused.

"I'm really not interested in you." She said quickly.

"I know."

"I didn't invite you over to-"

"I KNOW."

They looked at each other and laughed again.

"If it was anyone else I wouldn't even offer." Lysa said. "But you're different." She wrinkled her nose. "Or, at least, I think you're different…"

"If you're uncomfortable I could just go back home-"

"And get arrested?" She shot back. "No, you're staying at my place." She paused. "Completely platonically, of course."

"Okay now you're just making this awkward."

"Am not!"

They walked along arguing playfully about nothing, neither of them willing to continue the conversation the much more dire situation. The thought still weighed heavily on his mind, and hers as well. But now didn't seem to be the time to talk about it.

"Oooh, this is going to be so much fun." Lysa said enthusiastically. "You can help me go through the comments sections on my articles and video. Maybe we could do an interview, too…"

"I'm kind of tired, honestly." Will admitted. "I sat around your apartment doing nothing for like eight hours."

She gave a start. "What? You stayed there watching me sleep?"

"No, I-"

"No, I get it." She said, crossing her arms. "I'll watch YOU sleep tonight, okay?"

"Are you staying up all night again?"

"Might as well." She said, shrugging. "I'm sure people are already trying to discredit that video. I may need to clear some things up."

Will yawned. "I guess when you wake up we'll go back to Jason's and interview Alice again."

"Sounds like a plan." Lysa said enthusiastically.

They found themselves in front of her building and climbed the stairs.

"We'll figure something out." Lysa said airily. "This entire thing should be resolved in the next few days."

"Yeah."

They stepped up into her apartment and stepped inside. Will looked around the dirty apartment, wondering just where he was supposed to sleep, when Lysa rummaged around and dragged out a spare blanket and pillows.

"You're not sleeping on my bed." She said. "On the floor."

Will gave her a look and moved for her couch instead. She gave an annoyed hiss but did not object. He set the pillow and blanket on the

couch and lay down. He was tired. A brief nap, he thought, would be wonderful.

"Alright." Lysa said, not missing a beat. She moved over to her computer, pulled out the chair, and sat down. She booted it up and sat there, staring at the screen.

"Well?" Will asked, for a moment.

"The video's still getting a ton of hits." She murmured, as she clicked around the screen. "And there's a lot of support… but…."

She wrinkled her nose and began to type furiously.

"It's the same as last night." She said, annoyed. "Everything I do is WRONG apparently…"

"What are they saying?" Will asked. He felt a strong wave of tiredness coming on. He tried his best to make himself comfortable.

"Well… anything that comes to mind, I think." She said, as she scrolled through the feed. "This girl is an actor; we go to school together… NO SHE FUCKING ISN'T!"

She pounded the keyboard furiously, muttering to herself as she did so. Despite the noise, Will found himself completely at ease and comfortable. He felt as if he could sleep through this.

"I can't believe these people." Lysa was saying, as she continued to pound the keyboard. "These IDIOTS need to listen and believe… Why would I LIE about something like this? For attention? Get real, losers… FUCK."

She angrily pounded the desk with her hand. Will closed his eyes and allowed himself to rest. He alternated between naps and restful waking moments. He occasionally made out Lysa muttering to herself viciously in the dark, her fingers clicking against the keyboard.

But eventually she too went to bed and the apartment became still and quiet. Will slipped into a deeper sleep then, and by the next time he awoke it was the morning. And Lysa was right back up at the computer.

“You didn’t stay up all night, did you?” Will asked, yawning.

“No, I took a couple of naps.” Lysa said brightly. Despite her words, she did look somewhat tired, but satisfied. “Lots of people are on our side, it feels like.”

“Ohh…”

“Lots of people are firing shots back at our critics.” Lysa said happily. “They’re asking about what they tried to do with you, why there hasn’t been a formal investigation… all sorts of things.”

“What about Alice?”

“What about her?”

“Has anyone come forward with any ideas of what we should do with her yet?”

Her smile faded.

“No.” She admitted. “Not yet… most people are interested in what the police are doing. They seem to think that Alice is already in good hands.”

Will crossed his arms. “Well, that is true.” He acknowledged. “But-“

“I understand.” Lysa said quickly. “But Will… we can’t just get rid of her. If we shove her off onto just anyone she’s going to end up back in their hands.”

Will sighed. “I know.” He said gloomily. “What do we do?”

“One step at a time.” Lysa assured him. “And that is getting her story out there. Once we do that, everything will fall into place.”

“Alright.” Will said. “Then what’s on our agenda for today?”

“Interview time.” Lysa said brightly. “Maybe we can have Alice respond to some questions from our fans.”

“Our… fans…?”

“People following the case.” She said, as if he were stupid. “Ummm… I went ahead and wrote some common questions down.” She held

up a bright light blue notebook with a little Mulan sticker on it. “I’ll try and get her to answer them today.”

Her eyes turned to the window. “Oh, it looks like it’s going to rain!” She moaned. “Can we get going now?”

His eyes followed hers and he saw that she was understating it. It looked as if it were going to storm.

“No problem.” He said. “They’re probably not expecting us this early, but…”

“Let me take a shower and we’ll go.” She was already making her way across the room.

“But what about-“

She closed the door and locked it. Will sighed and sat back down on the couch.

She was out in twenty minutes, fluffing up her hair with a towel.

“Alright let’s go.”

“Well shouldn’t I-“

“You can shower THERE.” She told him pointedly, shoving him towards the door. He scowled at her.

“I don’t want to leave-“

“We can’t wait, we’ll get rained on!”

They stepped out into a light drizzle. They hurriedly stepped along the pavement and down the street, their heads bent, Lysa’s small black umbrella barely covering them both.

“It’s going to get nasty soon.” Will noted, glancing at the encircling clouds. “Can you run?”

“NO!” She snapped. “I’m allergic.”

“….To running?”

Despite her protests she managed a kind of gait as they hurried along the sidewalk, the rain falling on them in a light drizzle.

They spoke little as they hurried along. Will felt with some annoyance that he could got there a lot earlier had Lysa not been huffing and puffing behind him. He felt a strong sense of relief when they turned the last corner towards their destination.

Only for his relief turn to horror at the sheer number of police cars sitting in front of the building, lights flickering ominously.

Lysa gasped and grabbed his arm. “Will!” She said. “You don’t think…”

Will stared at the apartment horrorstruck. There were about six police cars just sitting out front. A number of officers were loitering around the front of the building. They looked big and intimidating.

“I do.” Will said at last. “They found us.”

Lysa hurriedly reached into her bag and pulled out her tablet. She raised it and fumbled with it. Apparently the drops of rain falling gave her a little bit of trouble. Finally, she looked up at him.

“I should record this.” She said. “If something happens… I’ll post it, okay? Do…. Do what you need to do.”

Will bent his head towards her. “Thank you, Lysa…” He said quietly. “I’m depending on you.”

And with that he took off down the street, towards the building. His hands were balled into fists and his eyes were set dead ahead.

He was not noticed, at first. The officers had their attention focused on the building, staring up at it apprehensively as if expecting something to leap up at them. But when he got within twenty feet of the car, one of the officers turned around and looked up at him.

“Wait, please stop-“ He began, before hie eyes widened with recognition. He leapt forward, reaching in his pocket for his baton, and whipped it out. He raised it over his head as he charged at Will. The other officers turned as Will grabbed the man’s wrist, twisted it, threw him to the ground and kept walking forward.

“I need to see my friends.” Will said coldly. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Another man came at him and Will brought up his fist and smashed it across his face without even breaking stride. The man went soaring backward, slamming into the car and sliding onto the concrete.

"Stop!" The remaining two officers raised guns at him and pointed it at him. "You're under arrest!"

Will stopped. "Why?"

"For assaulting an officer!"

Will gave him a cold look. The officer took a step back and raised the weapon.

"On the ground!" The Officer shouted. "Now!"

The rain that had been drizzling on top of them suddenly began pour down on them. The officer cried out in surprise, flinching as the unexpected cold water splashed into his face. Will moved in like lighting. He reached forward, grabbed the man's weapon, twisted it out of his grip, slammed him against the hood of his vehicle. The other officer cried out and took aim, but Will took the limp dazed form of the Officer and held it out in front of him, like a human shield.

The officer had no choice but to lower the weapon as Will lifted the man up and charged forward, shoving the dazed man into his partner. They crashed together and fell in a heap, the partner's weapon sliding out of his grip.

Will kicked that aside as well as he progressed towards the building. He climbed the stairs, his expression firm and hard, as he stepped out onto Jason's floor. Their door, he could clearly see, was ajar.

"Where are they?" He could hear a voice shouting from within.

"I have no idea!" Reiko's voice cried back. She sounded confused and afraid. "Where is your WARRANT?"

Will stepped up to the door and stopped, transfixed at the door. It looked as if it had been broken into. He wished Lysa was here to document it.

He stepped through the door and stared around the hall, trying to discern where the voices were coming from.

"Where is the girl?" The voice repeated. "Don't put yourself in a worse position than you're already in. Do you want to go to prison for kidnapping?"

"Kidnapping?" Reiko repeated, appalled, as Will crept silently through the house. The door to their living room was open, and Will could hear their voices coming from there. He pressed himself against the bare wall and held his breath. "She was staying here of her own free will-"

"I doubt that very much." The man said coldly. Will peered his head around the corner and saw that two men were standing in the room, staring at Reiko. One was another officer, but the man speaking was dressed in an immaculate black suit and gloves. They had their backs to him. Will was about to strike them when the door to the kitchen suddenly opened.

Will jumped back in surprise as another man, another officer, stepped through the door. The man looked equally surprised, but quickly caught his bearings.

"Freeze!" He shouted, as he went for his gun. Will didn't freeze. Instead he jumped in the room with Reiko and the other men.

The men turned in surprise as Will whirled on them both. He brought one powerful fist to the side of the man in black's cheek, sending him flying. He used the momentum to spin around and kick the other man across the face.

Reiko screamed as Will turned around back to the door as the man turned the corner, his gun raised.

"Freeze!" He shouted, as the men on the ground moaned in pain and began to push themselves off the ground, rubbing their jaws and cheeks. Will felt himself seize up. He was completely trapped.

"Well." The Man in black said, as he got his bearings. Despite the large red mark on his cheek he seemed none the worse for wear. "Will Wei."

“Who are you?” Will asked. “And what do you want with her?”

“We’re just asking Reiko some questions.” He said easily. “She doesn’t seem to have any answers for us, but since you’re here…” He gestured for the police officer to come in, and the man did so reluctantly. He kept the gun trained firmly on Will. “Perhaps you could help us.”

“Will, don’t say a thing.” Reiko said to him hurriedly. Will nodded at her.

“You’re not in a position to stay silent.” The man said. “The two of you are in very big trouble. You have illegally been keeping a girl without a passport here, in this apartment, without alerting the authorities.”

“That-“

“Don’t say anything Will.” Reiko hissed. “He’s not a real officer!”

Will stared at her, and then back at him.

“You’re one of the kidnappers!” He blurted out. The man did not react to this allegation.

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make wild claims.” The man said easily. Will bristled.

“Are these real police?”

“Of course they are.” Reiko answered immediately before he could. “But they control the police Will!”

“I would stop talking if I were you, Reiko.” The man said casually. “You are, after all, on the wrong side of the law.”

He casually placed his foot on top of Reiko’s beautiful coffee table and leaned over to Will.

“So.” He said. “You are Will Wei. Born 1999 on this very campus. You’ve been learning how to fight from Jason since you were thirteen .You ae very close to the family, to the point where you’re practically a part of it.”

Will found himself at a loss for words.

“Where is Jason?” The Man in Black asked him. “Do you know?”

Will did not answer.

“Perhaps you know where he could have taken Alice?”

Will thought he should play dumb. “Who?”

“That girl you were sitting next to in that video you made last night.” The man said casually. Will paused. That couldn’t be right. Did they… did they find them because of that video?

“No idea.” Will said, just as casually. “None.”

The man stared at him. “Don’t you lie to me.” He said. He raised a pointed finger and jabbed him in the chest. “Bang.”

He lowered his hand. “That’s going to be you, with a real gun, if you don’t stop fucking with us and come clean. Where is the girl?”

“You wouldn’t kill him!” Reiko snapped. Despite her anger, Will could sense a tinge of nervousness within it.

“I wouldn’t.” The man agreed. “But I can ask him to do it.” He looked at the cop with the gun. “Are you ready, buddy?”

The man nodded.

“There you have it.” The man in black said cheerfully. “Talk or you get plugged.”

“I’m sure this is illegal.” Will said flatly.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He placed it in his mouth and lit it.

“Who are you going to call?” He asked. “The Police?”

Will had to restrain himself from hitting him again.

“Look at it this way.” The man said conversationally. “You either give us what we want, or we take it from you. I think you would both prefer it if you just tell us where they are.”

“I told you I don’t know!” Reiko snapped.

“If she doesn’t I certainly don’t.” Will said. “I’m not married to Jason. I don’t know anything. Who is Alice?”

“Don’t play dumb with me.” The man said, as smoke began to fill the room. “It isn’t good for your health.”

“Neither is smoking.”

“You’re a funny kid.” The man said. “But not a smart one.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Will demanded.

“You’re not in any position to ask me questions.” He said easily. “All I want is for you to answer mine. I won’t ask again… Where is Jason?”

“I don’t-“

“Shoot him.” The man said sharply. Will let out a shocked gasp as the man began to pull the trigger.

“NO STOP!” Reiko cried out. She had gotten to her feet and anxiously stared around at all of them. “Please don’t hurt him!” She said. “I’ll… I’ll do anything! Just don’t hurt him!”

“Reiko!”

“Where is he?” The man demanded, waving his hand at the man with the gun.

“I… I told you I don’t know!” She said nervously. “But I…. I could call him. I could call and tell him it’s safe to come back. If it’s me on the phone, he’ll do it. And he’ll bring the girl. Just… don’t hurt Will.”

“Reiko…” Will murmured. He felt a strong sense of revulsion and embarrassment with himself. He had come here to rescue her, but in the end it was she that was rescuing him. The man stared at her.

“That.” He said. “Is an acceptable compromise.” He nodded at the man with the gun. “Do you have your phone?”

“It’s… in the other room.” She said cautiously.

“You.” The man said, gesturing to the other man. “Go with her and make sure she makes this call. No funny business, mind you.” The man nodded. He stepped forward and took a firm grip of Reiko’s arm. She looked miserable and dejected, and did not meet Will’s eye

as she was led out of the room. They turned at the corner and headed to the kitchen.

"Well Will." The man said. "You were of use to us after all. I couldn't bring myself to order a pretty little thing like that to be hurt, but an ugly motherfucker like you?" He chuckled. Will glared at him, hating him with every fiber of his being.

"You won't get away with this." Will said. "Any of you."

"You're quite right." The man said. "You can't get away from something if it's not chasing you."

"You think you're untouchable?"

The man removed the cigarette from his mouth and blew smoke at Will's face. He coughed and spluttered, waving his hand in front of his face.

"I know so." He said. "This bruise you put on my face? This is all I'm ever going to get."

Will couldn't help himself. He brought his fist up and smashed him across the face, sending him flying across the room. The man with the gun jammed the gun into Will's back. "Stop or I will shoot!"

Will grimaced and lowered his hand as the man chuckled, shakily getting back to her feet.

"I'll give you one thing, kid." He said. "You hit like a truck." He rubbed his cheek again and stared at Will. "Maybe you spent your high school years beating up potential bullies and impressing college chicks with your moves, but that isn't going to help you here. One man with a gun has made you completely helpless."

Will grimaced as the man pressed the gun further into his back. If he were to fire, he would not miss. "I would never call myself helpless." Will said coldly. "Weren't you just saying that you wouldn't get anything more than one bruise?"

"One bruise or two, it doesn't matter." The man said disparagingly. "I'll still get what I want."

“And what do you want?” Will demanded. “Alice? Or something more?”

“That.” He said. “Is a secret.”

A loud, harsh scream hit their ears. The man with the gun pulled away from Will in shock, his weapon pointed towards the door. The man in Black barely had time to scream at him to stop before Will whirled on him.

It was over in what felt like moments. Will pounded his fists into his sides, kicked at the back of his knees, and slammed his head against the coffee table, sending blood spilling out into the room.

The man in black hurriedly reached for his own weapon, but Will leapt backwards into a fierce side kick, impacting his stomach and forcing him to bend over in pain. Will lowered his leg and lurched forward, grabbing his collar and pulling him in close.

“This.” Will said. “Is a taste of what’s coming.”

He raised his hand and punched his face so hard that his neck snapped back. Will grimaced as he pulled back, and punched him again, and again, and again, and again. Each time his neck snapped back, and then rolled back forward. By the time he was through his entire face was broken and bruised. He gurgled, a trickle of blood falling from his mouth Will strongly suspected that he had punched out teeth.

“Will!”

Will dropped the broken man at his feet as he turned to see Reiko racing towards him. He barely had time to react as she threw herself at him in a fierce hug.

“Reiko!” He repeated. “What…”

“I… hit him!” She cried out. “With a heated frying pan!” she sounded completely hysterical.

“You were defending your home.” He told her immediately, gripping her firmly. “They didn’t have a warrant, right? They had no right to do this to you… or us.”

He gripped her arm reassuringly. “Let’s get out of here before more of them show up.” He said.

“Careful Will.” Reiko said quietly. “I think… once he treats those burns...”

“Stick with me.” Will told her, as he led her to the door. She did so without argument.

They could hear running water coming from the kitchen. The man was, Will realized, still very much conscious but trying to quell the pain in his arm. Apparently he was not aware of what had happened in the other room. Rather than confront him though, Will led Reiko to the door.

“Lysa is waiting out front.” He told her. “Livestreaming. Fancy an interview?”

Reiko tried to laugh, but it come out like kind of a squeal. “S-sure.” She said. “But… weren’t there officers out…?”

“We’ll deal with them.” Will promised, as he led her back into the open air. The police cars were still parked out front, but the officers that he had struck seemed to have moved. Will felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he led her to the stairs.

Despite his fears, however, there were no officers or men in black waiting for them. But as he took a good hard look around the area…

“Lysa?”

For a moment he thought that she had been taken by the police or driven off, but before he could start panicking a voice answered.

“Will!”

Lysa stepped out from behind the stairs looking relieved, tablet still in hand.

“What happened?” She asked. She gasped. “Reiko!”

“Trouble.” Will said grimly. “But I don’t know what.”

Reiko smiled at Lysa tiredly. “They came about two hours ago.” She said. “Jason took Alice and managed to get away. I stayed behind to hold them off, but…”

“Did they hurt you?” Lysa asked, panicked.

“… I struggled, yes.” She said. “I think they came off worse, though.” A shadow fell across her face. “They underestimated us, though. They really did think they would catch us in bed. But we were prepared for this.”

“So where did Jason go?” Will asked the question without regarding the fact that Lysa was recording their every word. He barely had time to worry how this could go wrong before Reiko answered.

“Out of town.” She said. “We agreed that we need to get her out of the area. They’re getting desperate.”

“Desperate?” Will repeated. “Why?”

“Because you…” She nodded at Lysa. “Exposed them.”

She blanched. “Me?” Lysa said .”How-?”

“By documenting their actions, by staying so vigilant, by addressing concerns and dismantling their public statements, the public has become very aware that the local police force has been very much complicit in this case.” Reiko said. “They couldn’t even wait to have a warrant issued before coming after us, that’s how severe this is for them. They don’t want Alice to appear on camera again.”

“But that’s…” Lysa struggled to find the words. “But I haven’t heard anything about this!”

“The most important thing for them right now is to seize the girl and take control over the case.” Reiko said. “Will, I promise you. If they get a hold of her they will construct some cock and bull story about how Alice is being well taken care of and that we don’t need to worry about her anymore. We cannot let them have her.”

Will stared at her. “How do you know this?” He asked her blankly. “How do you-“

“Will.” Reiko told him. “Do you doubt me?”

The answer came to him immediately. Reiko had told him from the start that they couldn't trust the police. She, Jason, and even Alice had known what was going to happen if they went to them. Somehow they had known.

He had not believed them. And it had led him to being held at gunpoint, arrested, attacked, and screamed at.

"No." Will told her. "I don't doubt you."

He turned to Lysa. "But I don't like the idea of Jason being alone out there." He said. "If they get him… if they find him…"

"Alice will be taken back." Lysa breathed. Her eyes began hard. "We have to stop this. We need to go the police station."

Will and Reiko looked at her, surprised. "The police station?" Reiko asked. "Why?"

Lysa's lip curled. "We're going to go where they least expect us." She said. "We're going to ask questions about what they did here today. It won't directly help Alice, but if it helps people understand that these cops are corrupt…"

"That's… not a bad idea, actually." Reiko said, surprised. "Will, what do you think?"

"If we don't know where Jason is…" Will said slowly. "It may not be a good idea to go to them."

"Yeah, when they're not helping kidnappers with their child trafficking operation." Lysa said disparagingly. "Well? Should we go now?"

Will cast a look at Reiko.

"Are you able to go?" He asked her anxiously. "You've been through a lot."

Reiko sighed.

"Will…" She said. "I can't let you go alone." She grimaced somewhat and pushed herself away from him. Will reached out to her as she staggered away from him.

“Reiko, are you sure?” He asked anxiously.

“I can rest when Alice is safe.” She said stubbornly. “Until she is-“

“You can barely walk.” Lysa told her flatly. “Reiko, you’re smart right? Can you write? Like… a blog post?”

She blinked. “A blog post?”

“Yeah.” Lysa said. “If I’m going with Will to livestream, I’ll need someone to manage the blog. If YOU could update that, and inform people of what’s going on….”

Realization dawned on her. “I could still help!” She said. Lysa nodded and smiled.

“Find a computer.” She said. “The library, maybe… or use your phone. I’ll give you access to the blog and you can get to work.”

“I… will.” Reiko said, biting her lip. “But Will… Both of you… be very careful, alright? These people are willing to do anything. You may find yourselves in over your heads. Please… Be careful.”

“We will.” Lysa said.

“I’ll protect her, Reiko.” Will said. “I promise.” Lysa scowled.

“I don’t need your protection-“

“Good…” Reiko said. She looked very tired, and Will felt a strong surge of sympathy for her. “You should get going now.”

“I’ll send you the information.” Lysa promised. “Give me your number?”

They exchanged phone numbers and said their goodbyes. Will felt that splitting up was a bad idea, but they had no real choice. He hoped that Reiko would be able to find some place to lie low while they went straight into the lion’s den.

“We’re going to go in together, right?” Lysa asked him conversationally as they set off.

“Probably.” Will said. “Still recording?”

“Livestreaming.” She said, poking at her tablet. “Hi guys!”

She paused, flicking through the chat.

“No, he’s not my boyfriend.” She said, annoyed. “I’m a lesbian. And he-“

“There really are people watching live?” Will asked. “How many?”

“A couple of hundred.”

He stopped. “A couple hund-“

“I know right?” Lysa said, excited. “It’ll explode when shit starts happening, believe me.”

“A lot has happened already.” Will said, still trying to wrap his head around the idea that a couple of hundred people were watching them Lysa seemed to think that that number was going to get even higher, but Will honestly didn’t see that happening.

“Well, we have the whole day ahead of us.” Lysa said cheerfully. “I’ll try and keep the stream running.”

“How long can you do that…?”

“All day, I’d say.” She said. “My battery is great.”

“Excellent.” Will said. “Just don’t let anyone take it from you.”

“Weren’t you supposed to protect me?”

“I thought you didn’t want to be protected?” Will retorted. “I thought you were a strong progressive feminist.”

“Well, the tablet needs protecting, not me.” She said. “You should protect the tablet. You need to keep the stream running.”

“I’ll protect you; you protect the tablet.” Will said. “Deal?”

“Hm.” Lysa said. “I think that’s a good deal, but I’m not sure… what do you think, Chat?”

Will turned away from her and focused his attention ahead. “I think we need to focus on what comes next.” He said. “We’re going to walk right in and demand answers.”

Lysa giggled. Will turned back to look at her.

“What is it?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” She asked him innocently. “There’s a couple of girls here who…. Uh, want to know.”

He found himself smiling as he shook his head, and turned back around. Before long they found themselves standing in front of the police station. They stared up at it. No one seemed to be outside the building.

“Well.” Will said. “Ready?”

She pumped her fist at him. “I was born ready!”

“Okay.” Will said. “Come on then.”

He climbed the steps to the building with Lysa following close behind, the tablet raised. Third time was the charm. Will thought to himself wryly. The first two times they had dragged him here of his own free will to try and scare him and drive him away. Now he was here of his own free will.

The secretary at the front desk looked up as they entered.

“Can I help you?” She asked politely. It seemed to be a habit, because her eyes immediately widened when they fell on Will.

“You-!”

“I’m back.” Will said casually, as he stepped up to the desk and leaned over. The girl, flustered, bent down and began rummaging around on the desk, trying to grab the phone.

“Hello?” She said hurriedly. “Will Wei is here! Here! At the front desk! Hurry!”

She slammed the phone and stared at him worriedly. “What do you want?” She asked, sounding rather frightened.

“The police broke into an apartment today without a warrant.” Will said. “I thought I would like to speak to the Chief of Police about it.”

The girl blinked.

“A… break in?” She repeated. “That’s… why you’re here?”

“Well there’s a couple of reasons why we’re here.” Will affirmed. “Some of your officers broke into a house in order to kidnap a girl.”

He could tell that the girl had no idea what he was talking about. She struggled to respond.

“I… I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She stammered. “I-“

“I just need to speak with the Chief of Police.” Will told her. “If that-“

The door burst open and a man came barreling through gun raised. Lysa screamed as the man brandished the weapon in front of him.

“Freeze!”

“I’m not moving.” Will said, a little too used to these gun happy cops by now.

“You’re under arrest!”

“I came here to report a crime.” Will repeated, firmly. “That this station was complicit in.”

The man fingered the trigger. The girl at the desk let out a small scream.

“You certainly don’t want me to file an official complaint.” Will said conversationally. “You certainly aren’t making a good impression. First you deny that a girl had gone missing in the area, then you go trying to cover it up. And now you’re trying to silence anyone that’s asking any questions.”

“Silence!” The man roared. “On the ground! Now!”

Will did not get on the ground. He stood there in front of the weapon, hands at his sides, almost a little bored. The girl in front of him was staring up at him open mouthed. Lysa, who had taken several steps back, still had her tablet placed firmly on the scene in question.

“The way you’ve been acting…” Will said. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you? Other underage girls have been forced here from other countries to serve as sex slaves, and you’ve been looking the other way. How long has this been going on? A year? Two? Five… Longer than that, even?”

The man did not respond. The weapon was still pointed firmly at Will.

“This must be really embarrassing for you.” Will said. “You spent all this time, all these resources, all this money, all this manpower, to try and control these girls and the instant one gets away from you it all came crashing down. People know, jackass. They know the stunts you’ve pulled to protect these criminals; they know about a single victim you’re trying to get back. And they know that you’re going to do it again, unless you’re stopped.”

“You’re insane.” The man told him. “None of that is true! None of it!”

“Then why did you pull a gun on me when I walked into the building?” Will shot back.

“YOU’RE UNDER ARREST!” The man roared, as he stepped forward. He lowered the gun for a brief moment as he reached for a pair of handcuffs, and that was all Will needed.

He grabbed the gun and twisted it out of his grip. The man cried out in pain as Will leaned back and brutally kicked at his knee .The knee felt like it snapped under his foot. The man roared with pain as he fell to the ground, clutching his leg, as Will turned around. The girl let out a cry and pushed herself away from the desk, eyes wide.

“Please don’t hurt me!”

“I won’t.” Will assured her calmly. “I’m not like them.”

“…What do you mean?” The girl asked.

“Your department is involved with child trafficking.” Will told her. “They’re coming after me because I know one of their victims.”

“You…. I… what…?”

“I will give you a chance.” Will said. “To do the right thing.”

The door opened again. Will whirled around expecting another attack, but instead he came face to face with a sweaty looking Officer Stefani.

“Officer!” Will said, surprised, as he lowered his hand. “What-“

“Will.” She said urgently, as she approached him. “What are you doing here…?” She looked down at her feet and balked. “And what did you do?”

“I was attacked.” He said coldly. “Again.”

She grimaced. “I… I see.” She said. “Will, we need to talk.”

“Now?” He asked.

“Now.” She said. “Will… please listen to me.” She sounded almost pleading.

He had come here to talk to an officer, after all. If Stefani was willing.

“Alright.” He said. “Want to take this outside?”

“I do.” She said, nodding. “As you were.” She said to the girl, as they turned and walked out. The girl was staring after them as they left.

Lysa narrowly stepped out after them as they walked out into the street.

“What is this about, Officer?” Will asked conversationally. Lysa, he noticed, dived to the side as if they were not together and took a seat against the side of the building. She raised the tablet as if she were simply playing around with it.

Stefani paid her no mind. Will wasn’t sure whether she was ignoring her or had not even noticed her to begin with. She looked troubled and worried.

“Officer?”

“Will.” She said. “I’m…” She turned her head upward to the sky. “I… I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Will repeated, befuddled. “For…. What?”

“For allowing you to do this.” She said. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t… that I let this happen. I knew there was something about this case. I knew there was something wrong about this girl, about how we were handling everything. And I…. didn’t question it.”

She looked back down again at him.

“You need to know something, Will.” She said. “Not everyone on the force knows what’s going on. I’ve been asking around and it feels like there’s a very small group of people who are controlling the investigation. I was pulled off of the case because of what happened during your first interrogation. And ever since then…”

She sighed.

“I can’t do this anymore.” She said. “I won’t let them do this.”

Will stepped closer to her. “Officer…” He said slowly. “You’re a brave and good woman.” He said. “You don’t need to apologize to me. Actually it’s probably because of you that I- that we are in the position we’re in now.”

She nodded, but she still looked somewhat unconfident and unsure of herself.

“Listen.” Will said. “We’re looking for Jason and Alice. The police came to where we were keeping Alice, and they made a run for it. We don’t know where they are, but-“

“I do.” Stefani said, surprising Will. “Will, they might kill him. They need the girl, but Jason…”

“Kill him?” Will repeated. Stefani nodded, biting her lip.

“Our department told them that he kidnapped her.” She said. “So they’re sending teams of people after them.”

Will felt a strong sense of revulsion well up in his stomach.

“There’s no way-“

“I assure you it’s true.” Stefani said, her voice heavy. “They need her back Will.”

“Who are they?” Will demanded, frustrated.

“That… I don’t know.”

He groaned and shook his head.

“What do we do…?” He muttered. “What do we DO…?” The idea that a highly trained strike team was going after Jason deeply unnerved him. These weren’t College Campus Cops… these were

highly trained individuals who were trained to deal with highly dangerous criminals. If they wanted Jason dead, he would die.

He looked at her again.

"We need to go to them." He said.

"What?" Stefani asked. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm not!" He insisted. "I was in that video with her! If I'm there, I can talk them down… he didn't kidnap her!"

Stefani stared at him. And then she nodded.

"I'll try to get in contact with them." She said. "Get in the car." She turned around and made her way to the parking lot by the side of the building. Will turned around to see Lysa making her way towards them.

"No." He said as she approached. "This is getting dangerous. I want you to stay here. Go help Reiko with the blog."

"But-"

"I said go!" He snapped, as he took off after Stefani, leaving a stricken Lysa behind him. Stefani had not turned around. She had taken off as if he had been following close behind, and he had to jog at a pace to keep back up.

He came up behind her right as she turned around.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked him anxiously. "I might not be able to protect you from-"

"I'm sure.' Will said firmly. "We have to stop them."

She nodded and opened the back door of the car for him. He climbed inside and watched as she walked around the vehicle and entered the driver's side.

She bent over and picked up a phone. She pressed a number of buttons on it and raised it to her ear.

She spoke a little bit, and then became visibly angry. She lowered the phone in a huff.

“They won’t call off the operation.” She told him. “They don’t care what I have to say-“

“Then what do we do?”

She turned her head forward, thinking deeply.

“He said Officer Ratcliffe had the situation well in hand.” She said slowly. “He’s there. So that means…” She stared the car and took off.

“What does that mean?” Will asked, as they went out into the street.

“It means.” Stefani said. “That I know how to find them.”

Will stared at her.

“All of our police cars are tracked.” She said grimly, as she turned the wheel. “Assuming he’s using his… he shouldn’t be far behind.”

He leaned forward.

“Are you sure that will work?”

She seemed perfectly confident, but she did not answer. Will leaned back in his seat and considered the situation, and the stakes. It would all end here, for better or worse.

“Stefani.” He said. “How should we go about this?”

“We need to find whoever’s in charge and let them know that they’ve been fed bad information.” Stefani said at once. “If they understand that something is wrong, they should call off the operation. And from there we can meet up with your friends and plan our next move.”

“And what is our next move?”

“I don’t know.” She admitted. Will laughed. He tried his best to not let it sound forced, or hollow.

“Neither do I.” He said. “But I’ve managed to figure it out so far, right?”

She smiled weakly, her eyes never leaving the road. Will felt himself deflate a little. Now was not the time for jokes. She probably thought he wasn’t taking this seriously.

He leaned back in his seat and tried to prepare himself mentally for what was to come. Although his mind had already drifted over all the things that could go wrong, he felt remarkably calm and confident. They had a chance to put a stop to this. And he intended to seize it and hold on for dear life, no matter what happened.

“We’re almost there.” Stefani told him. Will sat up and took a deep breath.

They turned the corner and found themselves in a small neighborhood that Will had never stepped foot in before. It seemed to be a rather well to do local neighborhood. Its residents were probably primarily local rather than students.

It was easy to spot their destination. A number of intimidating black vehicles, and two police cars, were parked outside one of the homes. The neighbors, older men and women mostly, were looking onward from their windows, seemingly in shock that anything like this could happen in their neighborhood.

“We’re too late.” Stefani said grimly. “They’ve already raided the building.”

“What?”

She had already parked the car and was stepping out. Will reached for the door and tried to follow her, but couldn’t open it. It was locked.

“Hey-“

“Stay here.” Stefani instructed, as she strode towards the building. Will watched her go, and immediately tried pounding his hand against the side of the car. It was no use- there was no way to unlock it. He looked up again in horror as Stefani approached the building, alone.

He could make out her muffled voice through the metal of the car. He could hear her calling out, demanding answers.

“You’ve got the wrong man!” She shouted. “Call off the operation! I have a witness!”

He saw her stiffen, and then step past the cars and out of sight. Will turned back to the door and tried to force it open. It did not. When he looked back up, he was surprised to see a large man walking towards him, with Stefani hurriedly following behind.

"No, don't-" She was saying. The man ignored her. He reached the car door and turned back to her expectantly.

"Open it." He snarled. He turned back to Will with great dislike.

"I-"

"That's an order." The man said. Stefani shot Will an apologetic look as she raised her hand and the lock clicked open.

The man ripped the door open and grabbed Will's arm. He was yanked out of the car and then slammed against it. Stefani let out a gasp.

"There's no need for that!" She shouted.

"You're under arrest." The man said coldly to Will, ignoring Stefani's pleas.

Will felt the man's weight press against him for behind. He did not move or resist.

"Under what charge?" Will asked quietly.

"Aiding and abetting a kidnapping."

Will kicked backward at the man's knee. The kick was so powerful, and so brutal, that it snapped. The man screamed in pain as his leg gave out, releasing Will, who whirled around and spun his elbow into his head. The man collapsed on the ground.

"I don't have time for this." Will told him coldly, as he stared down at him. Stefani looked onward, horrified. "Call off the operation. Now."

The man whimpered in pain. He turned to look at Stefani.

"What is happening?" He asked. "Do you know?"

"I… I don't." She said faintly, seemingly unable to get her bearings. She shook her head as more men appeared from behind her. They

looked awestruck at the scene, and then advanced upon them. At his surprised look, Stefani turned around.

"What happened here?" The first man barked, brandishing an automatic weapon before him.

"He attacked a witness!" Stefani explained hurriedly.

"A witness?" The man repeated. "A witness of-'

His eyes fell on Will. "You were in that video!"

"Yeah." Will said. "That guy you're looking for, Jason… he didn't kidnap her. You have to stop this."

The man lowered his weapon. Will felt himself relax. Finally, someone was listening to him.

"But if that's true, then why-"

They all jumped as gunshots rang out.

"I told them not to fire!" The man said furiously. "Who is shooting?"

Will felt himself start forward, but there was no need. The other members of the team scattered; their weapons raised.

"What happened?" Stefani asked, alarmed, as the man turned back around.

"Officer." He said formally. "I will ask you to look after our witness as I try to end this."

He turned around to the building and walked back into position, bellowing orders. Will and Stefani stared at each other.

"Well that's that." Will said finally. Stefani nodded.

"Now we wait." She said. "We should get back in the car."

"Only if you promise not to lock me in again."

She looked surprised, and then smiled at him. Again he marveled at how pretty she was.

"I promise." She said. He smiled back and opened the passenger side door. Stefani looked almost as if she were going to stop him, but then changed her mind. Apparently she felt that after what had

just happened he deserved a little treat. She stepped back around the vehicle and entered the driver's side.

"Who fired those shots do you think?" Will asked, as they sat down.

"Who knows?" Stefani asked grimly. "Someone disobeying orders, it sounds like."

"We've seen a lot of that, huh?"

She sighed. "Yes." She said gloomily. "It just keeps happening, and I don't-"

She stopped, hands gripping the wheel. Will turned to the front door of the house.

The front door of the building burst open. A large burly man burst out, carrying a woman over his shoulder. He did not turn around, but made a mad dash to one of the black vehicles. The doors in the back popped open as he reached them, and he leapt up. Will caught a good look of the girl.

It was Alice.

"It's her!" Will exclaimed, leaning forward. The van doors slammed shut and the van suddenly shot out into the street.

The squad of men came pouring out into the street, weapons raised, pointing all around. It dawned on Will in an instant. It was not the police who had recovered her.

"Stefani!" He said. Stefani seemed to understand without having to be told. It was not long before she had started her car, and they set off in pursuit. The men with guns watched as they hit the road.

"This is Officer Stefani. We are in pursuit of a black vehicle…" Stefani was saying. Will barely registered her words. He was staring intently at the vehicle, the driver of which already seemed well aware that they were being chased. Despite the narrow city streets, both vehicles were picking up extremely dangerous speed. Will knew that one mistake on Stefani's part would result in disaster.

The van swerved in between cars at dangerous angles, and Stefani was forced to follow close behind. Will could see people stop and

stare as they shot past.

The voice over the police radio said something that Wil could not make out. Stefani snorted, leaned forward, and turned it off.

“They want me back off.” She said. “So they can get away. I’m not going to let that happen. I’ll run them off the road if I have to.”

Her hands wound more tightly around the wheel.

The van swerved past a red light, ignoring furious honking noises, and shot off down another street. Stefani followed suit.

“How do we stop him?” Will asked anxiously, as a couple of passerby kids leapt out of the street, shouting excitedly at the chase.

“Normally other units would cut them off.” Stefani said slowly. “But it’s just me.” She looked steadfast, and determined.

The van took another sharp turn. This time Stefani sped up. People screamed as the police car slammed into the van, from the backside. The speed and force sent the back end of the van spinning around.

The van made as if to escape, by going forward, but one of the cars on the road moved itself and blocked off its only road to freedom. The van, panicking, began to back up, only to be cut off by Stefani. Because of the action of a random bystander, there was nowhere for them to run.

Stefani leapt out of the car, weapon raised, and Will was quick to follow suit. They stepped across the pavement with quick footsteps. The backdoor of the van burst open. Two large burly men leapt out, looking furious.

“What is the meaning of this?” One snapped. “What are you-“

Will stepped forward.

“Shut up.” He said. The man raised a hand against him, but Will easily knocked him aside, and his friend after that. He stepped up to the van and raised his arms. Alice was sitting there, eyes wide.

“It’s okay.” Will said quietly, as he stepped forward. “I’m here to-“

Alice leapt forward and her arms fell around him. Will flinched with surprise as her arms tenderly wrapped around his shoulders. She looked exhausted, and ragged. She had likely been through more than Will was aware of today.

"Come on." Will murmured quietly, as he led her to the door. He heard something slide behind him and he whirled around. A man holding a handgun leered at him from the driver's seat of the van.

"BANG BANG."

People screamed. Will turned back around and helped Alice down to the pavement. She was so light that he could have easily carried her. Her hand wrapped in his, he stepped around the van to see a shaken Stefani holding a gun.

"Thanks for that." Will said. Stefani smiled weakly as she lowered the pistol.

"How is she?"

Alice, upon seeing Officer Stefani, let out a panicked noise and tried to pull away from her. Will held her more tightly.

"Relax, she's with us." He told her reassuringly. "Come on, let's go home-"

He stopped speaking as the sound of sirens began to fill the air. Stefani lowered the gun, suddenly looking very apprehensive and nervous. Alice gave Will another pleading look.

Will had to quickly come to a decision. "Stefani, we can't trust the police." He said. "We have to go."

"I… I can't leave." She said. "I need…. I need to give my statement on what happened here." She sounded nauseous. Will couldn't argue with her. He nodded and turned away, Alice in tow, and led her off down the street. He hoped that she would be alright.

The people waiting in their cars were staring at them. Will ignored them as he led Alice by the hand down the pavement. Her footsteps were gangly and awkward. For whatever reason it seemed as if she was not able to move quickly.

“Alice.” He said. “Can you get on my back again?”

She pressed her head against his shoulder and sighed. She had been very quiet since he had gotten her out of there. He gripped her leg tightly and thought worriedly about where he could go next. Jason’s place was out. Lysa’s was too far. He had no choice. He had to bring her home with him.

With a destination firmly in mind, his feet began to move quicker and quicker, and soon he was almost jogging along with Alice in tow.

People stopped and stared as he jogged past with her. He ignored them; his mind set firmly on his goal. He turned the corner to his house and stepped up the front steps. He opened the door and was careful to keep Alice from hitting the sides of the walls as he carried her inside.

Wolf was sitting in front of the TV, as usual, but this time he turned and looked up at him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He asked, as he stood up.

“She’s hurt.” Will told him. Wolf stared at him, his mouth open.

“Have you called the police?”

“No, don’t!” Will said quickly. Wolf stared at him, shocked.

“I’ve already talked to them.” Will said hastily. “Don’t worry about it.”

He carried Alice to his room and laid her down on his bed. He turned around and closed the door, and pulled out the chair to his desk and placed it at her bedside. He sat down, meeting her eye. She looked at him, and then smiled.

“Hey.” She said softly.

“Hey.” Will echoed. “You doing alright?”

She blinked at him.

“No…” She admitted. “I was… really scared.”

“I can imagine.” Will said, touching her hand. “What happened?”

Her lips tightened.

“They came…” She whispered. “Jason took me, and we ran. But they came after us and….”

“What happened to Jason?”

“We were separated.” She said. “I don’t know where he is.”

Will kept his face stoic trying not to let his worry show on his face. Jason could very well be hurt, arrested, or even dead. And Will was the one who had gotten them involved… Will could not help but feel that this was his fault. If Jason had been killed…

He shoved the thought out of his head.

“Do you need anything?” He asked. “Water, maybe?”

She did not answer. She simply moved her head. Will, deciding that she should have some water whether she wanted some or not, stood up and opened the door. Wolf jumped back away from it, looking a little embarrassed, as Will stepped past him.

He moved to the kitchen and grabbed a glass. He filled it up and walked back to his room. Wolf’s head turned as he passed through the door, closing it behind him.

“Here.” Will said, as he set the glass on the table next to her. “Does anything hurt?”

“N-no…” She said. “I’m just… tired…” She yawned. Will, almost instinctively, leaned forward and adjusted her pillow. She gave him another sleepy smile as he pulled away. He moved away to the window and closed the blinds. A little sunlight trickled in through the window into the room.

He turned back to Alice and looked down at her. She had turned to look at him.

“I want you to get some sleep.” Will told her. “I won’t be far. Call if you need anything, okay? I’ll come running.”

Alice moved her head onto the pillow, and Will honestly felt as if she went straight to sleep. He was smiling to himself as he turned and quietly opened the door.

Wolf was still standing by the door. Will shut the door behind him and turned towards him.

“Yeah?” Will asked.

“What is going on?” Wolf asked immediately. “Who was that girl? Who-“

A loud, mechanical screech came from outside the house. Wolf fell silent as Will strode to the front door and peered out. As he had thought, a police car had just pulled up front. And he could see two more following behind.

Will groaned and pulled away from the door, shaking his head. He braced himself and pressed his body against the door and watched as the officers climbed out of the cars and advanced towards the building, weapons raised. His breath hitched in his throat as they approached the door. They looked at each other, and one of them stepped in front of the pack.

Will recognized him immediately. It was Ratcliffe.

He rammed his hand against the door and shouted. “This is the police! Open up!”

Will took a hurried step backward as Wolf came trotting up from behind. “What?” He asked stupidly. “What’s going on?”

Will shook his head furiously as the pounding continued. Wolf stared from Will to the door, his mouth wide open.

“We know you’re in there!” The voice continued. “We will be breaking down the door in THREE-“

Will’s eyes widened. He looked around the room frantically, trying to decide what to do next. His first thought was to rush back to Alice’s side, but he changed his mind as the man called out his next number.

“TWO-“

Will turned wildly back around, towards the door. He wasn’t sure what to do. He couldn’t allow them inside, but… what else could he do?

"ONE-"

Will opened the door.

The officer who had been about to kick open the door pulled back in surprise, raising his weapon. Will looked at them all as each and every one of them pointed their weapons at him.

"Can I help you?" Will asked coolly. Ratcliffe glared at him.

"Will Wei." He said. "You are under arrest for assault and kidnapping. You have the right to-"

Will's gaze hardened. Ratcliffe flinched. He raised the weapon as if he were about to fire.

"I think." Wil said coldly. "You have the wrong person."

Ratcliffe looked taken aback for a moment, before glaring back. He took a step forward. "We have reason to believe that the girl you kidnapped is here, in this building."

"Do you have a warrant?" Will asked, as the man stepped over the threshold. In one violent movement Will slammed the door onto him. Ratcliffe cried out in pain as the door slammed into his pelvis. In another quick movement Will disarmed him, ripping the gun straight out of his hand and stepped away- his new weapon raised.

Ratcliffe, doubled over in pain, stared up at him in terror and fear. The other officers fixed their weapons on him, but none of them fired.

"You have no right to be here." Will said calmly, his weapon training on them. "Without a warrant." He could feel an intense energy building up within him. The pain and frustration of the past few days, the feelings that he had tried so hard to restrain and hold back, especially when it came to his dealings with the police, felt like they were about to burst. "Accusing me of crimes that you committed."

Ratcliffe straightened himself, grimacing. "What are you doing?" He snapped. "Shoot him!"

None of them did. Will honestly was not sure why, before a terrified sounding noise hit his ears. Wolf was standing right behind him. If they fired on him now, they could very easily catch Wolf in the crossfire.

"I have a girl here." Will said. "But she's asleep. I'm going to have to ask you to leave until she wakes up."

"You have no right to-"

"You have no right." Will interrupted. "To keep protecting the interests of criminals."

Ratcliffe stepped back. Clearly having a weapon pointed at him made him very nervous. Another officer, however, stepped forward.

"Stand down." The man said gruffly. "You! Move!"

Will could not hear Wolf moving. It seemed he was frozen stiff. Will stiffened his grip on the gun.

"I'm not going to let you take her." He said. "I'm not going to let you take her back."

The man stepped closer.

"Stand down!" He barked; his weapon aimed squarely at Will. His four buddies stepped forward cautiously. Will was severely outnumbered. There was nothing he could do. He had to give up. He had to submit. He had to..

He had to…

He had to…

He had to do SOMETHING…

He lowered the gun and shot the man in the leg. The man cried out in pain as he bent over, and Will tackled him. The officers behind him in the doorway shouted, panicked, as Wil lifted the man off the ground and charged through the door, bowling them over.

He dropped the man and the force of the momentum spent him tumbling down the porch steps. He turned and stepped back, in between all four of his armed assailants.

One tried to attack, hitting him with the butt of his gun, but Will grabbed his arm and twisted it: the weapon falling to the floor. It went off, firing off into the distance as Will threw the man backwards, right into another officer. They stumbled, slumping over the railway of the porch, as Will turned to his next enemy. The Officer raised the weapon, his finger on the trigger.

Will ducked. The gun went off, and the man behind him cried out in pain as the bullet slammed into his chest. The Officer who had fired the shot was staring, horrified, at what he had just done as Will's fist came up for his chin.

The uppercut was one of the most brutal Will had ever delivered. The Officer's head went reeling back, his feet lifting off the ground, before he fell with a sickening crunch on the porch.

Will turned to the men on the fence who were trying to regain their balance. He was on them both in an instant, knocking them both over the side of the railing. They fell over on the ground with a sickening crunch. He turned around again, trying to find signs of more activity. But none of his enemies were moving. All four of them were lying on the ground.

Four… Weren't there six?

Wil barely had time to process this information as a scream filled the air. He dashed forward, towards the door, and looked back inside the house.

There, standing in the hallway outside of his room, were the two officers. He barely registered what he was doing. He charged forward. The man turned as he ran towards him and raised his gun. Will grabbed a glass on the table as he passed and threw it at him. The glass slammed into his face, shattering into pieces as he recoiled. The gun went off, and the bullet missed Will by a mile, slamming into the TV, sending sparks and glass into the room.

Will closed the distance between them, and before the man could point the gun again, Will slammed him against the wall. He cried out in pain as Will's powerful fist connected with his stomach again, and

again, and again. He vainly tried to raise the gun again, but Will quickly knocked it out of his hand and continued his assault. By the time he was finished, the man wasn't even conscious anymore.

Will let the man fall to the floor in a heap as he turned around. Ratcliffe, with Alice flung over his shoulder, was jogging out of the front door. Will narrowed his eyes in rage and took off.

He was so fixated on Ratcliffe that he did not see the man jump out at him from the other side of the door. He brought up the butt of the pistol and crashed it again his head.

THWACK.

Blood burst out of Will's head as he collapsed to the ground. The man adjusted his grip on the pistol and raised it, pointing down at him.

"FREEZE!" He screamed. "Don't move!"

Will cupped his head in pain as he stared up at the man with the gun. It was one of the men he had punched off the porch. He looked beaten up, but triumphant.

"You're under arrest!" He shouted. Will stared up at him, blood welling up on his face. He clenched his fist furiously. He could hear Alice screaming. No one was coming to help her. No one. He cupped the blood in his hand and flicked his wrist.

The officer instinctively backed away at the blood spatter, and Will slid forward, kicking out at his legs and knees. The man cried out as he fell, and in one smooth movement Will was back on his feet. He ran past him, towards the street, where Ratcliffe was trying to shove Alice into a police car.

He turned, surprised, as Will reached him and punched him in the face. He sprawled against the backside of the police car. He tried to raise his hand to defend himself, but Will grabbed his shirt and pulled him back, and slammed his fist against his face.

Over and over again Will hit him. He could hear bones and teeth crack at the assault, but he did not stop. The only reason he

relented was the car engine starting.

Will looked up, surprised, to see that another officer had gotten into the driver's seat. He tossed Ratcliffe aside, and reached for the door, but before he could open it the car had taken off. Will gritted his teeth and leapt forward, his fingers wrapping around the car door. He cried out in pain as his body dragged alongside the vehicle, supported only by a single arm. He tried vainly to pull himself forward, to better support himself. But with the vehicle picking up speed, he couldn't do it.

No…

No….

The pain…

The Pain…

Can't

Hold

On…

Pain…

PAIN…

PAIN!

He screamed as the car took a sharp turn to the left. The momentum sent him spinning onto the street, rolling along the pavement. He barely had the strength to take the landing. He came to a stop on the side of the street, his head slamming into the concrete with a sickening crack. A searing pain burst in his skull.

He had no idea where he was or what was happening. He could head people crying out, surprised, surrounding him, muttering among themselves incoherently. Someone, a woman, had leaned down near him and was saying something to him. He murmured. She turned away from him and spoke to the crowd.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there in the street. He could hear buzzing voices around him, he could feel people touching him. He

saw a woman pressing a finger against his face, and could make out her whispered tones. He moaned. He thought he could make out a relieved sigh.

He blinked. Suddenly things were starting to become a bit more clear. He shifted about in place, moaning in pain, as he sat up.

"No!" The woman cried, pushing him back down. "Don't overdo it…"

Will shook his head as he brushed her hand aside. "No…" He murmured, as he tried to stagger to his feet. The strength in his body seemed to have left him. The stress he had just beat himself through was just too much. "I can't…"

He tried adjusting his position so that he was on his hands and knees. He tried pushing himself back on his feet. He winced in pain and agony as the pain in his arm flared up again, agonizingly.

"I can't let them…"

He got his feet under him. He managed to push himself up, teetering dangerously, as he stared straight ahead.

"Let them get away…"

He took a step forward, and then fell. The woman cried out as she reached out and caught him.. Will was a lot bigger than her- he had to steady himself to keep him from falling down on top of her and hurting her.

"Thank you…." Will whispered.

"You have to stay still!" The woman told him, eyes wide. "The ambulance… It's coming. You're going to be fine!"

"Alice…" Will murmured. "Kidnapped… I need… please…"

It was simply too much to remain standing. His head was spinning violently, pounding with a sick agonizing fury, that it was too much for him to remain standing. His legs gave out and he buckled, slamming back onto the concrete, and lay face first on the pavement, and thought no more.

…

When he next awoke he was lying in a warm, comfortable bed. His first instinct was to wonder whether he had fallen asleep at Jason's house, but as he got his bearings he realized that he was in the hospital.

He twitched, and a sharp pain in his arm seared violently. He let out a panicked yell, and almost immediately a nurse came to his side.

"Oh… you're awake." She said brightly, as she leaned over him. "I'm glad. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible." Will answered honestly, before launching into his question. "What happened?"

"Head trauma, torn ligaments in your arm…. Lots of scrapes and bruises." She answered, as she checked his arm. "You'll be fine, thankfully. But you could very easily have been killed. What were you thinking?"

"I have to get Alice back." He answered, immediately. "Where is she? Do you know?"

The nurse laughed. "Oh, she's fine!" She answered brightly. At his surprised look she remedied her answer. "I was told you might ask about her when you woke up. But she's fine, really."

"Really?" Will asked excitedly, leaning forward. "Where is she? Can I see her?"

The nurse laughed, shaking her head. "I was also told." She said. "That you need to focus on recovering. I'm sure you'll see her soon. Okay sweetie?"

Will nodded and leaned back in his bed. Despite the aches and pains all over his body, excitement ran through every little bit of his mind and soul. After all that… after all they had done… they had won.

He allowed the nurse to change his bandages and give him a more detailed explanation of his injuries. He was told not to exercise strenuously; his arm wasn't up to it. He was told that if he had landed on his head when he hit the street he would have easily been

killed. The pistol blow to his head was nasty, but had not resulted in a concussion. He would, given enough rest, make a full recovery.

This made him even more elated: He had begun to worry that the damage may have been permanent. He would be training again with Jason in no time.

"Oh…" He gave a small start. The nurse had not mentioned Jason or Reiko. "Do my friends know I'm here?"

"Oh, you've had a handful of guests already." The Nurse told him. "But you were out of it, so you probably don't remember…" She smiled. "There was a little blonde girl crying her eyes out… Your girlfriend?"

That had to have been Lysa, although he found it a little weird that she would cry over him. He suddenly felt a little guilty that he hadn't thought about her at all until she had been brought up. He needed to make it up to her. He was sure that Jason and Reiko would want to celebrate. Lysa would be more than welcome to tag along.

"Do they know I'm awake?"

"Probably not." The Nurse answered. "But I can fetch them for you, if any of them are here."

"Please do."

The Nurse smiled at him warmly and left his bedside. Will leaned back in his bed, trying to relax, but desperately trying not to fall asleep. He amused himself imagining what Jason would do if he walked in, expecting Will to be awake and ready to talk, only to find him asleep. Punch him, most likely. He would find that hilarious.

Will sat by himself for fifteen minutes, thinking about everything that had happened. He thought of Stefani helping them, of all that Jason and Reiko had sacrificed, all that Lysa had done with her writing and videos. He thought of Alice, and all that she was free to do. She could watch all the anime she liked, play all the board games she wanted, go anywhere she liked and do whatever she pleased. In ten years she would likely be living a relatively normal life, with a husband and children. It might take her a long while to get there,

but Will knew that he, Jason, and Reiko would be there for her every step of the way.

He smiled to himself as he closed his eyes, thinking of everything that they had gone through together, and everything that was to come.

He didn't even notice that he had fallen asleep. He slumbered for what felt like a couple of minutes before he shifted in his sleep, and found himself waking up again. The door had opened, and the sound had startled him awake.

"Oh, Will!" Reiko exclaimed, as she rushed to his side. "Did we wake you?" She reached out a hand to touch his forehead. Jason followed behind quietly, his eyes fixed on him, clearly judging his reaction.

"I'm fine, MOM." Will said, brushing her hand aside. She pulled away, looking almost a little hurt as Jason chuckled.

"Are you sure?" Reiko asked, leaning in closer. "I can't believe you survived that fall, I thought for sure that you were a lot more seriously hurt-"

"I'm fine." Will said. "According to the nurse anyway."

Jason smirked. "Where did she go to school? You certainly don't look fine."

Reiko looked up at him, clearly a little annoyed. "Don't be like that." She snapped. "It could have been a lot worse…"

She looked troubled for a moment, and then looked back down at Will. Will, however, was still looking at Jason.

"Jason…" Will said. "Where were you?"

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Jason sighed.

"I tried my best to get her away." He said, his voice gloomy. "I was planning on taking Alice out of town, but got wind they there were on to us. I tried to lay low at a friend's house, but they found us and…"

He sighed and shook his head.

“I felt like there was nothing I could do.” He said. “I’m sorry, Will….”

“It’s fine.” Will said. “It all worked out, right?”

There was a very awkward silence. Will could not understand why.

“Where is Alice now?” Will pressed. “Is she with you?”

Reiko took in a deep breath.

“Will…” She said. She seemed to be choosing her words very carefully. “Alice… is not with us.”

He looked at her, confused.

“Oh.” He said. “You didn’t bring her with you? Why not? I would have liked to see her.”

“Will.” Reiko said. “She WAS taken.”

Will stared at her. It took him a moment to wrap his head around what he was being told.

“What?” He asked blankly. “But the nurse said-“ Reiko’s hand, which had been placed on his bed, clenched into a tight fist.

“The official story.” Reiko said, her voice barely containing her rage. “Is that Alice has been taken to live under government protection.”

Will stared at her.

“The… official story…?” He repeated blankly.

“They’re saying.” Reiko said, emotion beginning to seep into her voice. “That it was all a big misunderstanding. You and Lysa…. You were led to believe by an Officer on the force that there was some grand conspiracy to undermine this case.”

Will stared at her. He was at a complete loss for words.

“They’re saying.” Reiko continued. “That Alice is completely fine and that she’s being well taken care of.” Her voice broke.

“But it’s not true. We failed!”

Will grabbed her arm.

“Tell me it isn’t true!” He shouted at her. “Tell me you’re joking!

“It is true, Will.” Jason said gravely, bending his head. “We wouldn’t joke about this.”

Will’s mouth opened, and then did not quite shut properly.

“How…. How could this happen?” Will asked. “How could… We did so much-“

“Don’t you understand, Will?” Jason asked. “This is why Alice never wanted to contact the police. She knew that she would be delivered right back to her captors, her story buried in the news, her freedom completely stripped away. No matter how many people knew about her, no matter how many people fought for her, no matter how many people cared about her story… all they needed was to be reassured by the authorities that everything was fine, and that they could go back to their everyday lives.”

Will clutched his sheets. His mind felt completely fractured and broken. It suddenly dawned on him that he, the man that had known more about Alice than perhaps any other, had willingly believed the Nurse who had cheerfully told him that Alice was fine. There was no doubt in his mind that she had completely believed it. She had not meant to mislead him: She had not meant to make him think that everything was fine, when it really wasn’t. She was simply repeating what she had been told. She was repeating what the police had told her.

“What do we do next?” Will asked quietly. Reiko pulled away from him, looking apprehensive. Jason looked rather stony. “What can we do next?” He asked, looking up at them. “Have you been in contact with Lysa? Or-“

“Will.” Jason said. “Lysa has been working night and day to try and rekindle interest in the case, but most people have been convinced that she’s simply trying to promote her twitter and career as a journalist. She’s a complete wreck at the moment… she’s cried on livestream more than once. People aren’t taking her seriously, now that the official story has been established.

“But-“

“The main reason you two did so well at first.” Reiko interrupted. “Is that they couldn’t settle on a narrative. They had to keep changing their story as you released more and more information about their behavior. That made people think something was wrong.”

“But now the impression people have is that that wrong has been corrected.” Jason said. “There is nothing more to talk about. Alice…. Is old news.”

“No….” Will whispered. “That can’t be true… that can’t be right! That’s not right! That’s-“

His voice was beginning to rise to a shout. Reiko and Jason tried to silence him as the door opened again and a nurse popped her head back in.

“Is everything alright?” She asked, alarmed.

“Everything’s fine.” Jason told her. “Please give us another couple of minutes.”

She gave him a look. “Well… Alright.” She said cautiously. “But don’t antagonize him, alright? He needs rest.”

“We won’t.” Jason promised. She gave him a wary look, gave a worried a worried glance at Will, and then turned away. The door shut behind her.

“We should go now.” Reiko said immediately. “Before we get kicked out.”

“I think so too.” Jason said.

“Hang on.” Will interjected. “You can’t go. What are we going to do next? How are we going to save Alice?”

Reiko sighed.

“Will…” She said. “I’m not sure…”

“We’ll talk about it when you get out of the hospital.” Jason said firmly, placing a hand on Reiko’s shoulder. “Just try and get better, alright? You’ve had a bad week…”

“I’ve had a bad week?” Will repeated, aghast. “What about Alice? What about-“

The door opened again, and the nurse stepped back inside. She looked very determined this time. But before she could say anything Jason spoke.

“We better be going.” Jason said. “Will, we’ll come visit tomorrow, alright? Everything is going to be fine. Don’t worry. Try and relax…”

“Good bye, Will…” Reiko said softly, still sounding a little bit upset. “It’s … it’s going to be alright.” Will knew that she didn’t believe her own words.

They turned their backs to him, and began to walk towards the door. Will closed his eyes. He took a deep breath.

“Guys.”

They stopped in the doorway. Neither one of them turned around to look at him, but Will could feel them hanging on to his every word.

“I’m not going to give up.” Will said. “Not now, not ever.”

Reiko turned back to look at him, and she could see that her eyes were full of tears.

“I’ll do whatever it takes.” Will said. “I’ll keep fighting. I’ll-“

“Will.” Jason said, not turning back around. “Later.”

He took a step forward. Reiko brushed a hand across her eyes, smiled at him, and then followed him out the door. Will sat there on his bed, watching his closest friends walk away. He had never felt more alone.

TO BE CONTINUED….